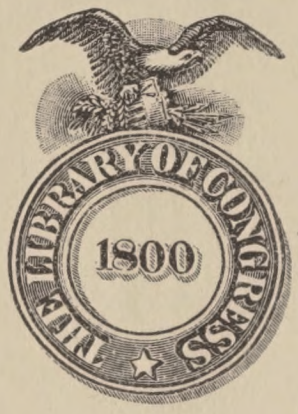
JOHN OF STRATHBOURNE



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JOHN OF STRATHBOURNE

JOHN OF STRATHBOURNE

A ROMANCE OF
THE DAYS OF FRANCIS I

BY

R. D. CHETWODE

NEW YORK
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
1898

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TO

JOHN GARRARD

I INSCRIBE

THIS STORY.

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JOHN OF STRATHBOURNE.

CHAPTER I.

MÈRE TAPIN.

MÈRE TAPIN turned uneasily upon her bed of leaves, as, with shaking fingers, I tried to wipe the death damps from her brow. My hand shook because I was frightened. I had seen scarce eleven years, and I was alone with the dying woman. Jacques, her husband, had departed in the early morning to fetch the priest; but as the hours passed on and he did not return, we knew well what had happened. He had halted at the village wine-shop and would remain there until his pockets were empty. Neighbours we had none. Jacques, when sober, was a charcoal burner, and our hut of boughs and clay stood far within one of the vast forests so plentiful in the fair land of France. For time, it was the winter of the year 1520—the year that saw the two gallant young kings, Harry of England and Francis of France, meet on the plains of Guisnes, on the Field of the Cloth of Gold. Little recked I then of this. I was a savage; ignorant, unkempt, untaught; the rude hut in the forest had been my home for so many years I knew

of no life beyond. And I was not all unhappy. If I had to work hard and fare harder still—my only reward a blow or a curse—at least my task-master was sometimes away, and Mère Tapin was always good to me. She was not my mother, that I knew well, neither was Jacques my father. But I was too dull and heavy to be curious; it never once occurred to me to wonder who I was, or how I came to be with them. Yet could I remember something of horsemen and of waving banners, something even of a tender woman's face bending over me; but these came only in my dreams—they were visions, not realities. As I watched by Mère Tapin, my once fair skin stained and darkened with toil until I was swarthy almost as she, I knew nothing save that I was losing my only friend.

There had been snow in the morning, and a thin film of ice had formed on every pool; but with dusk the wind rose and now moaned fitfully through the trees, mingled ever and again with the far-off howling of the wolves. Usually I gave no heed to such sounds, they were part of my life; but this night I was weak and frightened, and, creeping a little closer to Mère Tapin, caught hold of her hand.

Do not imagine, however, that I wished for Jacques; on the contrary, his absence was a great relief. I had not to slink away or to cower in a corner expecting every moment some cruel blow; perhaps to be kicked out into the darkness to find shelter where I could. Mère Tapin returned my grasp feebly, and we sat speaking no word until it

grew dark without as within. I could no longer see her face; I could only listen to her troubled breathing.

Presently she roused herself and said in a faint voice, "They will not come to-night. Jacques has gone to the *Cadran Bleu.* Yet he promised me. May heaven have mercy upon my sinful soul!" She was silent for a space; then, with more life than I thought within her, she went on: "What I can do I will, it is not too late for that yet. I would have told the good father; maybe that is why Jacques will not bring him; I will confess all to the boy instead. Throw some wood upon the embers, Jean; the death-chill is creeping up fast, and I have much to say."

We kept always a fire of wood burning in the centre of the earthen floor, and as I did her bidding, and a bright blaze sprang up, it revealed her livid grey face, and her hollow eyes fixed full upon me. The old woman lifted her hand and pointed to the farthest corner of the hut. "Dig yonder, Jean; dig to your elbow's length, then bring me what you find."

I obeyed without a word—I was not given to much speech—and turning up the earth with a pointed stick, I soon brought to light a small cracked earthen pot, its mouth stopped with a piece of cloth. I took it just as it was to the dying woman and her hands closed around it eagerly.

"I always meant you to have this some time, Jean, though the blessed saints only know whether it will bring any good to you. Bend your head close, closer still, and heed well what I have to say;

for my words must be few and brief. Jean, you know already you are no son of ours, but there is more than that—you are not of this land at all. You are one of the hated English, and if I guess aright, nobly born." This ought to have startled me, but I was so ignorant I scarcely comprehended what it meant. "Long ago, when this happened," Mère Tapin went on, speaking with difficulty (it was as much as I could do to hear), "I lived with Jacques in our own dear Picardy amongst our kinsfolk and friends. He was a good husband to me then; he never drank and he never beat me, until one day came the accursed English and burned our village and everyone was forced to fly. We took refuge in the woods, and after a time when the savage islanders were gone, Jacques and I ventured back. We wanted to see if they had left aught of our crops, to gather in what we could. There was nothing—nothing but the walls of what had once been our home, and we set to work to repair it. We had slept under a roof again for scarce three nights when, without the slightest warning, a party of the English came back. It was too late to fly; we could only abide their pleasure. But this time they spoke us fair, gave us money to pay for food, and when they departed they left behind a wounded man who was too much hurt to ride farther. They promised to reward us well if we would take good care of him until they came again. Two archers stayed with him, armed men who watched by turns night and day, and—strange sight at such a time—there was also a young child

whom the wounded man never suffered to leave him. One of the archers spoke our tongue and he told us it was his lord's only son; the mother was dead, and he went with his father everywhere. That child was yourself, Jean. At first we meant the Englishman no harm, but when Jacques found that his belt was full of gold, he made up his mind to have it. It was but fair pay for what the English had robbed us of. None of the neighbours had returned—we had no one to help—so I brewed a drink of herbs and mingled it with the archers' wine. They slept sound after that, but to make all sure Jacques stabbed them to the heart and then crept in to their master. We had thought to find him asleep, but the pain of his wound kept him waking, and he fought hard. He was big, and, spite of his hurt, so strong, he got his two hands round Jacques' throat, and would have strangled him. Another minute and it would have been too late, when I caught up the child and held my knife to it. The Englishman uttered a strange cry—sometimes I have heard it in the wood of late—then, loosing his hands, he called out, 'Swear by all you hold most holy to spare the boy and I will let go.' I swore by the bones of St. Geneviève, an oath I have never broken yet, and at once he sank back and only muttered a prayer or two whilst Jacques finished him."

Sluggish and dull though I was, her tale had made some impression upon me at last, and instinctively I drew away from her. My father had given his life for mine; that at least I could understand. "Ah, I knew you would not forgive," she

whimpered; "but remember, Jean, you promised this morning you would not leave me to die alone."

"Go on," I returned gruffly, "I am not going to leave you. You know I always kept my word."

Clutching my hand, as if to hold me fast, Mère Tapin resumed. "We buried them all in one pit, and, taking their horses, were many leagues away before dawn. We wandered about for months after that, till Jacques had spent all the money—'twas then he first took to drink—then at last we settled here. No one knew anything about us, and you passed for a child of our own. Jacques hated you always because you were of the accursed English; but I was good to you as he would let me be, lest the spirit of the dead man should come back. When you set your teeth so stubbornly, refusing to cry out let Jacques beat you never so hard, you grew so like the man we had killed I was not able to forget. But I kept this for you without Jacques knowing. 'Tis a ring the Englishman wore on a string round his throat, and a letter he had been writing in the morning. Jacques was to have taken it to Calais the next day for payment of a piece of gold. Look within and see."

I pulled the cloth from out the mouth of the pot and found a sheet of paper covered with writing, and a small gold ring with a device of two letters within a heart. Besides the writing, the paper was blotted with dark stains which I knew well to be blood. The letter had no significance for me—I was ignorant of reading or writing—but the stains of my father's life-blood did not appeal to me in

vain, and from that moment I held the relic sacred.

"Take care of the paper, Jean," Mère Tapin went on, her words coming slower and slower. "Some day perhaps it may help to show who you are. I have done all I can for you now. Jacques does not know; mind, do not let him see,—see——" And her voice died away and all was still.

But she was not dead. I could still hear her heavy breathing, and after a time she sank into a state of stupor which I took for sleep.

I kept the fire going, afraid of being left in the dark, and as I watched it I went over again all that the woman had told me. Strange to say, although she acknowledged what an active part she had taken in my father's murder, I felt little or no resentment against her. My hate was reserved for Jacques. I had abhorred him before, my heart was filled with thoughts of vengeance now; and taking out my knife, my one possession, I spent some time in softly sharpening it. Jacques was probably too drunk to return home that night; he would come in the early morning. While he was sleeping off his debauch I would stab him as he meant to stab my father. Remember, I was but a child, and all I knew of right or wrong had been taught me by this same Jacques. Had all fallen out as I expected I certainly think I should have done my best to kill the man; as it happened, he was reserved for another fate.

Whilst thus occupied, I fell asleep, to be wakened by a savage kick which lamed me for a week. Jacques had returned at dawn as I anticipated;

but the sharp morning air had not partially sobered him as usual; on the contrary, he was in one of his drunken furies. I knew well what to expect. One glance at the still form on the bed showed I had no protector left, and at once I tried to escape. The brute was too quick for me. He caught me by the hair and belaboured me with his cudgel until I could not stand. He desisted at length from sheer weariness; and bruised, and bleeding, and half-stunned, I tried to crawl out by the door. My retreat was expedited by another kick, my persecutor crying after me, "Begone, you island brat, you English devil; never let me set eyes upon you again. Come you within a league of me and I will kill you as I killed the pig your father."

Here was confirmation, had I needed any, of Mère Tapin's story. It was the rarest thing in the world for Jaques to talk in his cups, and never before had he whispered a word concerning my father. It was his wife's death, I suppose, that had brought the past back. Happily I had already hidden my treasures—my sacred letter and the ring—safely amid my rags, else should I never have set eyes upon them again.

CHAPTER II.

THE LITTLE LADY.

I COULD not crawl far, I was too exhausted from my cruel beating, but I crept to one of my old hiding-places and sank down upon a heap of leaves, too faint and sick even to think. When my faculties slowly came back, I pondered much upon what was to become of me. Of one thing I was quite certain. I would never go back to Jacques Tapin; better death in the forest with snow for my winding-sheet. If I had been turned out in summer time I should not have cared at all, I could have made shift easily; to be cast adrift in the forest in December was quite another thing. And I had no friend to whom I could go for help, no kind neighbour who might perchance have taken pity upon me. I had lived so solitary a life, alone in the forest always with Jacques and his wife, that I had become a veritable savage, shunning the face of human kind. I had no thought of leaving the woods even now, only some dim idea of getting away from Jacques and everyone else, and hiding where none could find me.

Towards noon, feeling a little better, I set forth upon my journey, making my way, as I thought,

farther in towards the heart of the forest. But first I visited the snares I had long ago learned to set, and in one of them I had the good fortune to find a young rabbit. I slung it round my neck, for, although hungry enough, I had no time to light a fire; besides, it might have brought Jacques down upon me. Then setting my teeth hard, for my foot had swollen and hurt me sorely, I resolved, be the pain what it might, I would not stop to rest until I had gone some leagues on my journey.

I know well now that I really travelled scarce any distance at all, but at the time I was quite satisfied, and thought I had done wonders. I had never been so far before, and when night fell, thinking myself far away, I lit a fire by the aid of flint and steel I always carried about me, and roasted my rabbit in the embers. When I had eaten I felt better, and, muttering a short prayer Mère Tapin had taught me, crossed myself three times to keep off the wolves, and crept beneath a heap of leaves and lay down by the fire to sleep. It was bitterly cold, and had it not been for the pain in my foot I might have slept never to wake again. As it was, I scarce closed my eyes, rising every hour or so to make up the fire and to rub my numbed limbs. I was very glad when morning dawned though it found me in sad plight. My foot was worse; it had swollen to a great size, and I could hardly put it to the ground; besides I was stiff and sore all over from the effects of my beating. Still, I would not give in. I picked up a stout stick and limped along as best I could,

walking without aim or motive, resolved to go until I dropped.

And this was in fact exactly what I did. I was found towards nightfall lying senseless in the road on the outskirts of a small village called Suresne. Instead of plunging into the depths of the forest as I intended, Heaven had directed my way otherwise. Every step took me nearer to the dwellings of men. It was a peasant woman returning from work who stumbled over me, a poor widow who tilled a few fields; and lifting me on her back, she carried me home. For days I was too ill to move, and that good woman, poor as she was, nursed and tended me as if I had been a child of her own. I was not asked many questions, a homeless starving child being too common in those days to excite much curiosity. I told the truth in what I did say: my name was Jean, I had no one belonging to me; beyond that I said nothing. This was not from any desire for secrecy, but simply because I was taciturn. I had lived apart from my kind for so long that beyond a mere "ay" and "no" speech was difficult.

But for all that I did not forget; on the contrary, as time went on, I thought of Mère Tapin's story more and more. There was good reason why I should. Whilst I lived with Widow Desfougères I began to find out slowly what it meant.

The widow's children were young; I was stout and big for my age, and as soon as my strength came back she was glad of my help. I stayed with this good woman for nearly three years, and as I worked in the fields by her side I often saw

the young lords and ladies from the Seigneur's château. They would ride by dressed in fine clothes, with long plumes flowing from their caps, and bright jewels flashing and glittering in the sun. On they would come at full speed, giving utterance to joyous cries and mirthful laughter, until it made one's work lighter only to see them. I used to watch them out of sight, to stand stupidly gazing after them even after they were gone, until Widow Desfougères recalled me sharply. I understood in some dim fashion that such would have been my own life had it not been for Jacques Tapin. Do not imagine I was discontented, I had not sense enough for that; I was perfectly satisfied with my condition. I was not beaten, I had enough to eat —earth contained no higher felicity. Only once, as far as I can remember, in those dark years did I feel any stirring of ambition, and surely in that was the hand of Fate.

One day when I was working alone in the fields I had the great good fortune to save the Seigneur's only daughter, a dark-eyed girl about a year younger than myself, from a position of some danger. She was riding with her gay companions when her horse took fright, and, after galloping far in advance of her friends, began to rear and plunge on the edge of a steep cliff. Luckily I was weeding near; I caught the bridle, then helped the frightened young demoiselle to alight. She had been very brave during the time of danger, she had not shrieked or uttered a cry; but directly all was over she had to hold me with both hands to save herself from falling. It was then, with her soft hands

clinging to me, that I first realised my boorishness, realised what a gulf there was between us, whereas if I had my rights I ought to be even as she. There was no bitterness in the thought, mind, only a sort of dumb wonder; the bitterness was to come later. Yet was I a great deal more grateful for the demoiselle's gracious thanks than for the money her father presently threw me. After that I watched for the little lady always, and she seldom passed me without a kindly word.

Widow Desfougères was in high spirits when I told her what had happened. "Depend upon it," she said, "my lord will send for you to the château, and perhaps give you a place about the stables."

My lord did nothing of the kind. The incident did not dwell in his mind as it did in ours; he soon forgot all about it.

Widow Desfougères had been a servant at the château before she was married, and in the winter evenings when we cooked chestnuts amongst the embers she would sometimes tell us of the gay doings there.

Mademoiselle Edmée had a brother a few years younger than herself, and their mother died soon after he was born.

"Ah, if it had been the little monsieur you had helped," cried the widow, "my lord would not have forgotten. He is the only son, the apple of his father's eye. The poor mother left him as a dying charge to mademoiselle, and, young as she is, she is devoted to the boy heart and soul. If his little finger does but ache, the nurse was telling me the other day, Mademoiselle Edmée will quit all her

friends to sit by his side; she is a real mother to him, truly."

"Yet I have never seen the little monsieur riding," I ventured to interrupt.

"Nay, he is a sickly boy, spoilt and self-willed besides. He does not care to ride far, and he will do only as he likes. Though his sister is so good to him, they say he is not kind to her at all; he cares for nothing but himself. But then, all the nobles are like that; Heaven made them so, and one day he will be Marquis of Suresne."

I lured the widow on to speak of Mademoiselle Edmée as often as I could, and she would sometimes tell me tales of how tender-hearted she was towards the poor, how prompt to help them when she had the power. But always would the old servant hark back again to the same tale, how the little lady lived but for her brother.

I stayed with the widow Desfougères, as I have said, for nearly three years; then the harvest turned out scanty, her children were older, the poor woman could no longer afford to keep me. The widow wished me much to go to the château and ask for employment there, and I have sometimes wondered what the course of my life might have been had I followed her advice. But something prevented me, something I knew not what, some strange shyness connected with the demoiselle. I liked well enough to watch her from a distance; to go nearer, to be her servant, no—it would make me feel my insignificance too much.

CHAPTER III.

IN STRANGE COMPANY.

AFTER some time, for no one seemed very eager for my services, I found employment at a wayside inn some leagues from Suresne, where they kept horses for the use of travellers. Here, among other things, I learned how to ride, and could soon keep my seat with the best of them. I stayed about a year at this place, leaving it at last rather suddenly.

My master was a bad-tempered man, servile and cringing to his customers, but a brute to those in his power. I was the least able of all to hold my own, and he often used me very hardly. I could stand a good deal, for I had served an apprenticeship under Jacques Tapin; but I was older and bigger now, and one day he went too far. Business was slack. He had been quarrelling all the morning, having high words, first with his wife, and then with every man about the place, until he finished up at last by giving me a good thrashing for no misdeed at all. Master landlord was a stout pursy man, his strength enfeebled by much drinking, and when for once my passive endurance gave way, he had no power of resistance. I turned upon him fiercely, wrested the stick from his hands, and be-

laboured his fat carcass until he bellowed and shouted for mercy. Not a creature came to his help; every one pretended not to hear; they were only too glad at what was happening.

This took place just without the courtyard, and it was not until I desisted from sheer want of breath I became aware that a horseman had halted by the roadside and was grimly watching me. He was a big burly man, bronzed almost to blackness by exposure to the elements, with fierce bloodshot eyes, overshadowed by beetling brows. He had two great scars on his face, reaching almost from brow to chin, which, combined with a huge moustache, gave him a savage and sinister appearance. A large black riding-cloak enveloped his form closely, but between the folds I caught the glitter of steel, and saw the pistols in his belt.

"What ho, tired so soon, boy?" he called out as I dropped the stick to the ground. "Drub the rogue for another five minutes and I will pay thee a piece of silver. Ay, that will I," as I looked at him in doubt, "and take you into my service after."

I picked up the stick, then let it fall again and shook my head. My passion had spent itself, and besides, the coward was now grovelling at my feet.

"You will not, eh? 'Tis a pity, the sight amused me; you have left off too soon."

At the sound of a strange voice help at last arrived; the stablemen came running out of the yard, women came forth from the inn.

"Seize him! Hold him fast!" cried my master, foaming at the mouth as he struggled to his knees.

"He is a cursed rogue, a no-man's brat. I will have the flesh flayed off his bones."

I made a bolt and tried to escape, but the master's eye was on them now, and the men were too quick for me. After a very short flight I was captured and dragged back to the inn. The man on horseback took no part in the affair, though he watched it with evident delight, and laughed loudly when he saw my discomfiture. But when all was over, when having ceased to struggle I was led away to be bound, he pushed his horse into the middle of the throng, and, bending down, caught me by the collar.

"Wilt serve me?" he said in my ear.

"I would serve the devil himself to get out of this," I answered sullenly, for I was not much taken with him. I thought, after having offered me money to thrash my master longer, he might have helped me to get away.

"You shall, boy; you shall. You have hit the mark this time, if never before," and he seemed to shake with silent laughter. "Catch my stirrup and hold fast," and muttering some words to his horse, which seemed a mighty savage beast, the brute began not only to plunge and kick, but made with open mouth at all around him. My captors were compelled to loose me to save themselves, and instantly my strange friend set off at a sharp trot, I running beside him with all the speed I could muster. When we were out of sight of the inn he slackened pace a little, saying:

"You can take breath now, boy; you will not be followed. People are not fond of running after

me." Then looking me up and down as if to take stock of my capabilities, "What didst do at the tavern yonder?"

"Tended the horses and rode post sometimes, and helped in the kitchen when house was busy."

"You can do that same for me. I need a horse-boy badly. My castle is up in the mountains, whose tops you see yonder; you shall stay with me until you are hanged."

I looked up sharply, and he chuckled. "'Tis the devil's pay always, and you know you agreed to serve him. 'Twas the fate of my last boy; he fell into bad hands, and they hanged him as an example to the rest. You don't like it? What matters? What difference between feeding the crows or the worms?" And he laughed and chuckled in his thick throat until I thought he would choke.

I could not tell from his manner whether he were in jest or in earnest, so, though I looked at him hard, I held my peace and said nothing.

After a time my new master quickened his speed again, still making me run by his side, until he went so fast I thought he had forgotten.

I soon found out my mistake. He was only amusing himself; in default of anything better, even my poor sufferings gave him pleasure. He pressed me to the utmost, and it was only at the very last, when, my feet torn and bleeding, my breath coming in slow gasps, I was compelled to loose my hold, he came to a halt, and gave me time to recover.

"Why did you not let go before, boy?" he asked, regarding me rather curiously.

I looked up into his evil face with surprise. "Have I not said I would serve you? Do I not belong to you now? I have done my best, but I cannot keep up with the horse; it is beyond reason."

"Say rather, you run from the whip of master landlord, that would be nearer the truth, I dare swear. But I will take you at your word. See yonder town?"—and he pointed to where the red roofs of houses showed through the trees. "Kennel there for yourself to-night; in the morning meet me outside the gates on the other side. Here is money"—and he threw me a small piece of silver—"Master Devil, you know, always finds his servants in meat and drink. But seek not to follow me, or to find out who I am, else will it be the worse for you."

I obeyed my orders to the letter. The stranger rode on alone, I followed slowly on foot, and for that night I saw no more of him. After getting a good supper with my earnest penny, I threw myself down upon a heap of straw and did not wake until morning.

When I met my new master on the other side of the town, he gave me no word either good or bad, only motioned me to take his stirrup and run by his side as before. He halted at the first wayside inn, however, and, after some little chaffering, bought an indifferent good nag, which I mounted joyfully.

We journey thus for three days without incident, making always for the mountains, but avoiding the towns as much as possible, and halting at little frequented inns. My master seemed to have

lost his jovial spirits. He never spoke save to give some order, cuffing me soundly when I did not understand quick enough, and with his cloak closely muffled about his face he scrutinised keenly everyone who passed. I thought him an odd man, but not yet did I suspect the truth.

On the evening of the third day, instead of halting for the night as usual, we but stayed an hour to rest the horses, then pushed on as fast as we could. At last we reached a spot where four roads met, when my master pulled up in the midst of the open space, and whistled softly a few bars of a song. We were joined at once by two horsemen who came out from underneath the shadow of a group of trees. It was bright moonlight, and I could see them well. Both were fully armed, almost as if for battle, yet everything about them was disreputable. Their cuirasses were rusty and dinted, the plumes in their hats all awry, their long beards were matted and dirty, and one was horrible to look upon—he had lost his nose. Little as I had fancied my master, he seemed a king to them; my heart misgave me as I wondered what strange company I had got into.

The new-comers returned my wonder with interest, until my master, who had suddenly recovered his good spirits, gave them an account of how he had fallen in with me. It was received with much laughter—indeed, the story, as he told it, was very amusing. I did not know I had done such fine deeds. After this we all set off together, riding at a brisk trot until it was too dark to see, when we halted in a grove of trees. Wine

and food were produced from somewhere, and they treated me so well I soon lost my first repugnance to them. We became the best friends in the world.

We were now at the foot of the mountains which had frowned above us so ruggedly, and directly it was light enough to see, on we went again. We followed at first a well-defined path which led in and out, and around sharp corners, but ever ascended higher. Suddenly my master, who was leading, quitted this for a rough bridle track along the edge of a precipice, and then up the steep mountain-side. We journeyed thus for some distance, the way growing more difficult at every step, and my horse not being so sure-footed as theirs, I had much ado to keep my seat. This made me lag behind somewhat, until at last they had to pull up and wait for me. We were then in the midst of a narrow pass, hemmed in with frowning cliffs, and all around bare and sterile. Shut in on every side, nothing was to be seen, nothing to be heard, save in the distance the brawling of a mountain torrent. If this were the usual road to the castle my master spoke of, it was very little frequented.

My new friends were talking together in low tones as I approached, and directly I came near enough I was ordered to dismount and change horses with Gottlieb, the noseless one.

"You told me you could ride," said my master contemptuously.

"So I can, monsieur," I replied, "or I had lost my seat long ago. 'Tis the beast is in fault, not I; he is not used to climbing the house-tops."

He was not offended by my freedom; on the contrary, I think it rather pleased him, for he replied in a more good-natured tone, "Gottlieb's horse can climb a church-steeple; you will profit by the exchange, and for fear you should falter on the way you shall ride blindfolded. Nay, I am in earnest," as I drew back a little. "We do not teach cats the way to the cream, neither do we make country boys too wise. If you attempt to remove the bandage before you are told we have a very short way with those who disobey us—over the cliffs you go."

My heart sank. I began to realise now into whose hands I had fallen. They were brigands without doubt, and I was being taken to their stronghold in the mountains. Yet after the first moment, now that I was fairly in for it, I was more curious than frightened. I had nothing to be robbed of, my life was not worth taking. I did not see what harm they could do to me.

There were many brigands in France at that time, numerous bands scattered up and down the country with scarce any to interfere with them. One cause of this was the revolt of the Constable de Bourbon, one of the greatest men in the land. He had been badly treated by the King, and, forgetting his duty, had joined hands with the Imperialists to fight against his own country. There were many excuses for him, his wrongs were great and sore, yet nothing in the world should make a true knight a traitor. Some of the great nobles were for the Constable, some against him, some waited to see which would win. Thus it came about

that there was no one to keep order, no one to do justice in the land at all.

One band in particular, noted for their daring beyond all others, we had often heard of at Suresne. They called themselves the Band of the Thousand Devils. It was a favourite answer of theirs when questioned: "Whence come you?"—"From the devil"; "Whither going?"—"To the devil"—and their acts corresponded with their words. They were the terror of the country-side for miles around. I had often shuddered at tales of their doings when sitting over the embers on winter nights. My evil speech had soon come back to me. I had offered in my rage to serve the devil and I was taken at my word.

At the time, however, I thought nothing of this; my new companions were far from displeasing me; I was as eager to enter the brigands' stronghold as I afterwards was to get out of it.

CHAPTER IV.

THE THOUSAND DEVILS.

I ALLOWED myself to be blindfolded, not complaining even though they drew the handkerchief so tightly as to hurt me. Then one led my horse by the bridle, and, after a time, by the sounds of splashing, I found we were passing through water. When this ceased, up we went again, by a way so steep I had to hold on to the saddle for dear life. Their horses, I found out afterwards, were trained to climb like cats. On we went until I thought we must be reaching the clouds, when we were brought to a stop by a clash of steel, and a ringing cry of "Who goes there?" The challenge sounded as if from above. I could not hear the reply, but at once there came a rush as of men scrambling down a cliff, and the sound of many welcoming voices. I was pulled off my horse and dragged up on foot between two men, until at last they came to a halt, the bandage was removed, and I was able to look about me.

I found myself upon a large wind-swept plateau, the summit of an outlying crag, bounded on all sides, save one, by perpendicular precipices. The one way of approach, the path up which the men

had dragged me, was a steep zig-zag track cut in some places out of the rock itself. In the midst of the plateau—strange situation, I thought, for a dwelling place at such a height—rose the remains of what had once been a strong castle. Some of it was in ruins, a mere shell open to the sky, but the greater part had been roughly repaired and rendered habitable. There were no outer walls, or ditch, or drawbridge, the precipice answered for all that; but there was a large hall surrounded by outbuildings, a round tower, and even, to my wonder, a chapel. This latter was in very fair preservation; there was much fair stone tracery around the window frames and slender carved columns. At the far end, raised three steps above the level of the floor, stood a large statue of our Lady of the Mountains, brave with many a jewel, and a lamp ever burning before it. Here, I found later, the brigands were wont to tell their beads for success before starting upon their marauding expeditions.

On the other side of the plateau, but separated from it by a gulf so deep that the tops of fir trees growing in the ravine below scarce rose to view, there towered a mighty mass of rock, spur of a neighbouring mountain whose summit was lost in the clouds. It rose straight upright at first, then at a great height, a broad shelf stretched out laterally like a fan, overshadowing the plateau for a short distance. Beneath this natural shelf, which formed a shelter from the rain and wind, they had built their stables, rude open stalls, formed partly of stones brought from the ruins, partly of trunks of trees.

At the foot of the zig-zag path, at the spot where

we had been summoned to halt, was a place called the Watch Tower. It was no tower in reality—no building at all—simply a roomy cave in the face of the rock from whence they could see far and wide. Three men were always on watch here, their duty being not only to guard the camp, but to give notice of travellers making for the passes below, in time for the band to sally out and intercept them.

A strange-looking company were my new companions. Some were dressed as herdsmen, some in buff jerkins and rusty armour, some in tattered velvets and satins, the spoils of their forays. And the men were as varied as their dress. There were court bullies and gamblers who had fled to the mountains when the city became too hot for them; disbanded soldiers making war on their own account; countrymen driven from their homes by ill-treatment of their lords; and poor wretches, escaped criminals, branded upon the shoulder or shorn of ears or nose like my friend Gottlieb. Truly they were a motley crew. My master, whose service I had entered so oddly, was captain of the band; his word was law to the whole of them.

There were good times and bad times among the brigands, but when I arrived they were very flourishing; rioting and profusion went hand in hand. Huge carcasses of the chamois and the deer, split in half, were roasting before great fires; there was a meal barrel heaped up with black bread, and wine skins filled to the throat were continually being pierced and emptied.

Next morning, when the first rejoicings for the return of the captain had come to an end, I was

given in charge to Gottlieb, who undertook to show me my duties. He led me first to the stables, the row of open stalls I have already spoken of beneath the overhanging cliff. After giving the captain's horse into my especial care, together with numerous other directions, not necessary to set down, he went on to say—

"You may eat with us, drink with us, talk with us, but you may not ride with us, nor take any share of our gains. You cannot become one of the Thousand Devils until you have killed your man."

"Killed what man? What do you mean?" I cried, a little startled.

"Anyone, the first who comes to hand, the first that our Lady of the Mountains sends you. We bring prisoners here sometimes; if they are not ransomed they have to die, and the job is always to the latest comer. You need not do it unless it so pleases you, we compel nó one to join us; but until your hands are as red as ours you will not be free of the band, neither will you be allowed to pass the sentry."

"I am a prisoner then?" I said carelessly; I was not going to let him think I was frightened.

"Only until you join us. Then, if you rob gallantly and obey the captain's orders, your life will be a merry one as long as it lasts."

"And if I do not choose to join?"

Gottlieb shrugged his shoulders. "All the better for us; our share will be the larger. You will be our horse-boy instead of our comrade, and if you attempt to escape you will be shot down like the dog you are. But that will not be; you are no

coward I can tell by the cut of you. When the prisoners come we shall see. We have none as yet; there will be time to make up your mind. Dost know how to handle gun and pistol?"

"Not a whit. I never had the chance."

"We'll soon teach you. Shalt not miss your man for want of skill. Come now, and I'll show you how to load and fire."

The men slept in the old castle and in the outbuildings, where was room for a whole troop, but until I was one of the band I was ordered to remain in the stables. The outermost stall was given me, open at the top just the same as the others, and with the ground for my bed, and a tattered bearskin for a cover, I began my new life.

I found plenty to do when the whole band were at home. I was everyone's servant, with never a moment to rest, from early morning until late at night. Yet, taken altogether, for the first part of the time at least, I had nothing to complain of. I had no more cuffs and kicks than might have been expected, and never once was I beaten. That may seem a small thing to make one content, but too much stick is as bad as too little, and it was not master landlord's fault that I did not fall into evil courses.

But when the captain led his men on some far off expedition, they would be away for days at a time, and save for those on guard in the Watch Tower I had the place to myself. And the guard never came up; the captain was obeyed when absent just as if he were at hand; they never left their post for an hour. I had to prepare food and carry it

down to them twice a day, but I was never allowed to remain, never allowed to pass beyond one appointed spot. All the time I was in the brigands' camp I was never inside the cave. And I soon found there was no other way down, for when left to myself I explored the plateau thoroughly. All around, save in that one place, was sheer precipice, so deep that no rope could reach the bottom.

Save to prepare the men's food and keep the lamp filled in the chapel, I had scarce anything to do, and as the nights were shrewdly chill I set to work to improve my sleeping place. I brought more stones from the ruins, filled up the crevices with moss and earth; hardest of all, contrived a roof with beams and planks I picked up around. I even fitted up a broken door I found lying unused, and thus shut the wind out altogether. The men laughed at my fine house when they came back, and Gottlieb shook his head and asked if I meant to remain a horse-boy always; but no one interfered with me. I was allowed to keep it for myself. I mention this here because later this hut played some part in my history.

Two or three months passed thus without anything happening that concerns me to mention. The brigands plied their trade down below, and when they came back, loaded with booty, there were riotous feasts and drinking bouts, lasting sometimes for days. When they grew tired of idleness, or when news was brought by some of their many emissaries that travellers were on the way, they all made ready and started forth to rob and plunder again. Happily, up in those mountain solitudes I

saw little of their doings, but they were great boasters, and their talk of deeds of blood soon became familiar to me. Sometimes I shuddered, sometimes I longed to make one of them, according to the character of the story; yet I never once doubted but that when the time came I should join them.

I saw little of my master, the captain; he never took any notice of me now. He was very popular with the band and governed them easily. Everything had prospered with the Thousand Devils, they said, since they chose the brave Baron for their captain. I thought at first they were jesting when they called him my Lord the Baron, but it appeared such indeed was his real title. He was an outlawed noble, who, for some offence committed at court, had been forced to fly for his life. His estates had been confiscated, he dared not show himself where he was known, and had been driven to take refuge with the brigands.

"And a good thing it was for us," said Gottlieb one day. "We soon saw what sort of a man he was and made him our captain. His rule is strict, if you disobey—pouf, a puff of smoke or a rope round the beam yonder, and all is over. But what of that when it is for the good of all of us? I will tell you one thing though, I would not care to be in the shoes of those who sent him here."

"Why not?"

"Because Monsieur le Baron has a long memory. If one of his enemies should happen to fall into his hands there will be little talk of ransom, I warrant you. I have heard speak of some noble lord not many leagues away; it was something to do

with the matter took the captain so far that last journey."

There was a loud laugh at this.

"He went for a noble lord and brought back Jean. A fine exchange truly!"

But Gottlieb stuck to his text. "Jean was an accident, he was picked up on the way; we shall know nothing about the captain's business until the time comes."

I listened to their talk carelessly, paying more attention to polishing my master's cuirass than to their idle words; but afterwards I had reason to remember them.

CHAPTER V.

PUT TO THE TEST.

HITHERTO my life in the brigands' stronghold had been tame and uneventful, but my courage was now to be put to the test. The day came at last when two prisoners were brought in to be held to ransom. They were burghers, inhabitants of a large town some leagues distant, who had travelled together for safety.

One was old, a grey-haired venerable-looking man, clad in sober coloured garments of rich quality, as if he were a citizen of substance. The other was younger and dressed in much smarter fashion, almost indeed as if he aped somewhat the nobles. With bandaged eyes and arms bound behind them, they were forced up the zig-zag path by sharp pricks from the brigand's knives. They were both in sad case, torn and dishevelled from rough handling; the older man, in particular, showed such manifest signs of suffering that I could not help pitying him. Nothing was done that evening, for it was already late when they arrived; they were given food and drink and shut up in the old tower for the night. In the morning they were brought forth, writing materials—kept in readiness for such

purposes—were placed before them, a sum of money was fixed as ransom, and they were ordered to communicate with their friends.

Whilst awaiting the return of the messenger—who was expected to be absent about a week—the prisoners were well treated and allowed to roam about the plateau. But when the man came back there was trouble. The friends of the younger prisoner had sent only half the sum demanded; for the other there was nothing at all.

Affairs of this kind were always conducted in public, and as the men gathered round to hear all that passed, I edged myself in among them. The younger burgher, who seemed a sad craven, was on his knees before the captain pleading for time to send another letter. The elder man looked on indifferently. Permission was granted at length, the writing things brought out again, and the frightened wretch, still on his knees, traced a few straggling lines on the paper. He had scarce finished when the captain drew his knife, and, quick as thought, sliced off the kneeling man's ear. His yell of pain arose sharp and shrill, yet was it drowned in the loud roar of applause that burst forth from all around. The captain held up his hand, and at once there was silence. Tossing the bleeding bit of flesh to the messenger, he said:

"Give that as our seal; it will teach them the Thousand Devils are not to be trifled with. The whole sum is still to pay, mind; I will take what they have sent as drink money." Then he turned to the other prisoner with, "And now, my friend, what have you to say?"

The old man shook his head. "Nothing. I wrote because you ordered it so, I never expected to be ransomed. My next heir has long wished me out of the way; he will not lose the opportunity."

"You know the alternative?"

"Undoubtedly, but I have lived long enough, I hope, to look death in the face without flinching. I would beg only that if it be possible I may see a priest before I die."

"That is a boon easily granted. We never fail in paying our dues to the priest in the valley below; he is at our service whenever we send for him. But I will treat you both alike; write once more and do it quickly, so the messenger be on his way by sundown."

"As you please," the old man returned in careless tone. "Only there is no need to mutilate me. I assure you beforehand that the sight of both my ears would make no difference."

The captain laughed approvingly. He always admired a brave man.

"You are no coward, it is a pity you are too old to join us. If you have to die it shall be as a whole man, and be you sure I will bear your heir in mind—he shall not escape punishment."

After that there was another week of waiting, during which the younger prisoner remained sulkily within the tower, nursing his wounded head. I was glad of that, as it gave me an opportunity of speaking to the other one. I had taken a liking to the old man from the first; when I heard his fearless way of speaking to the captain I thought even

more of him. Then, as I watched with what ease he wrote, it came into my mind at once that he could read me my letter. There were several among the brigands who could read and write both, one Antonio, of Padua, was as learned as any clerk. But I had never trusted one of them, and I kept my letter and ring always concealed about me. I was very anxious all the same to know what was inscribed upon it, and now I thought was my chance.

I had to wait upon the prisoners, taking them their meat, which they ate usually in the open air; now I served the old man alone. As I stood by his side, after first looking carefully around to be sure no one was near, I said in a low tone, "Monsieur, may I speak a few words to you on business of my own?" He looked a little surprised, but nodded his head, and I went on, pouring out his wine the while:

"'Tis a letter I would fain have read by someone who will not deceive me."

He smiled grimly. "Stolen goods, and you would trust me rather than your comrades? Truly, it is a false saying that there is honour among thieves. You are trying to filch more than your share, I suppose. I am afraid, my lad, that I cannot help you."

"It is not stolen; it has naught to do with any one of them," I returned indignantly. "It was writ by my murdered father, and I would find out if I can his name and station."

The old burgher stayed eating at this, and looked up with eyes that seemed to pierce me through. I would not be abashed, lest he should

think me false, and gave him back a gaze steady as his own.

"They murdered him?" he said, waving his hand toward the camp.

"No, monsieur; it was long before I came here. In Picardy, when I was a child."

"Tell me more. Stay——" as one of the men slowly sauntered by, and raising his voice a little, "Good friend, I think not over much of your cook. Yesterday my meat was raw, to-day—faugh, it is scorched to a cinder. I pray you bring me another flask of wine to wash the taste away. Not here, but in that sheltered corner among the ruins yonder, where the wind does not blow so chill."

The spot master burgher had selected was well fitted for our conference, for, whilst he sat full in view, I crouched out of sight behind a broken wall, so that we could not be seen talking together. And in this position he made me tell my story, asking so many questions that I kept nothing back at all. When I had finished,

"Boy, I believe and I pity you," he said. "Take the advice of an old man, and quit this vile life as soon as you can. As for your letter, I much fear it will be writ in the barbarous English tongue, if so, I shall not be able to read it. My own language, and the Latin—the Italian and the Spanish even, for they have to do with my trade—I could give a good account of, but my business has not been with those proud islanders; I know nothing of their jargon. Pass it quickly now, whilst we are safe from observation."

I watched his face through a crevice as he looked

over it, and could see his brow darken with mortification.

"It is of no use," he said at length; "save the name at the foot I cannot understand one word."

"And what is the name?" I cried; "that will be something."

"John—which means Jean in our tongue—John of Strathbourne. There is John writ, too, in the body of the letter, but what it refers to I know not. It is mostly likely some order to his servants; 'tis too carelessly penned to be of any consequence."

I have thought since the old burgher made light of the letter because he could not read it, but at the time my faith in him was implicit.

"Then it can tell me nothing," I said, greatly disappointed.

"Nothing likely to be of any use to you, my friend. The knight would have come from the town of Calais, which the English took from us of old; but to seek out his name there now would be like searching for a millet seed in a bundle of hay. Englishmen killed in Picardy are plentiful as nuts in harvest, Heaven be thanked for that same; they do not have it quite all their own way. Still, if you should ever wander so far, I have a friend in Calais who would be grateful to know what hath chanced to me. Go you to the house with the sign of the Dog and Porridge Pot, hard by the convent of the Black Friars, and ask for one Master Surbeck. Tell him in what manner I, Crispin Papillard, burgher of the good town of Gravenel, met my end, and for my sake he will befriend you. He will put you in the way of gain-

ing an honest living that is; as for the dead man, it is naught, it happened so long ago. For the ring, that also is nought, though had it but borne a coat of arms it might have helped you greatly. There is nothing, you see, save a useless badge, two letters inclosed within a heart. 'Tis a betrothal ring, most like. The gold is good, however; it would sell for a crown or two to help you on your way."

He was still holding it, weighing it in his hand, when a shadow fell athwart the grass—the captain had come suddenly upon us. It was too late to give it back to me, too late even to conceal it; and, as I crouched in my corner, I wondered much what the burgher would do. The old man was equal to the occasion. He rose as the captain approached, and, holding out my precious ring, said courteously:

"I have a ring here, Monsieur Capitaine, I would fain bestow upon a boy in your service who has showed me some civility. It is of small value, as you see; but I have nothing else, I have been stripped too clean."

I could see my master's grim smile from where I was hidden.

"Ay, ay, they mostly strip clean enough," he returned, eyeing it indifferently. "I marvel they have left you so much. Give the bauble to the boy an you will. He does not take his share yet, but 'tis worth little, as you say, and they deserve to lose it for their carelessness." And he turned on his heel and walked off.

Needless to say, I was overjoyed to be in posses-

sion of my ring again, and lost no time in placing it in safety.

Three days after this incident the return of the messenger put the camp once more into commotion. He brought the full amount fixed for the ransom of the younger prisoner, but nothing for the old man. There was a letter, which the captain read aloud, a missive full of excuses and protestations, but of money not one crown.

"I am sorry for you, Messire," said the captain, "but it is necessary that our laws should be obeyed. I promised you a priest—Gottlieb, let the holy man be sent for at once. Monsieur Barnito, here"—pointing to the other prisoner—"will remain as our guest until all is over; he can then tell the good citizens how scrupulously we keep our word."

In no very long time the priest arrived, conducted up the zig-zag path blindfolded as usual. He manifested no apprehension, his stout rubicund visage not being in the least troubled. It seemed to me as if he had been through it all before. Some few words of remonstrance he did begin to mutter, I suppose to satisfy his conscience; but when the captain told him a dying man awaited him in the chapel, he turned his steps thither at once, and did not come out again until all was over.

I had been watching all that passed rather sadly. I was grieved for the coming fate of Master Papillard, but as yet I had quite forgotten that it also concerned myself. Strange to say, Gottlieb's words had completely passed out of my mind, and—whether by accident or design I know not—never once had the brigands reminded me. I was now

to be rudely awakened, and that by the captain himself, the first time he had deigned to speak to me since I came to the camp.

"Jean," he said in a loud voice, though his tone, for him, was very gracious, "Jean, your chance has come at last, it is time you ceased to be a horse-boy. Play the man now, and you shall be enrolled among the Thousand Devils, an honour that does not fall to all. Bring forth the prisoner"—and as the old man was led out of the chapel, his arms fast bound to his side, Gottlieb placed a gun in my hand—"Shoot me down the worthy citizen yonder, and you are free of us."

I started back in affright. To kill an old man who had never harmed me, to kill him deliberately in cold blood, was terrible. Yet my pride forbade me to refuse. I wanted to join the brigand band, I wanted to quit my monotonous life and become one of them; above all, I feared to be called a coward.

I looked round; they were in earnest, they meant it; not one face showed the least sign of relenting. On the contrary, they were laughing and jesting, making bets as to whether I should fail, looking forward to the result with eagerness. At a short distance to the left stood the old burgher, bareheaded and leaning against the wall.

Seeing my hesitation the captain cried with a scornful air: "If your heart fails, boy, you can leave it alone. You may do as you please, the Thousand Devils want no cowards."

The word coward stung me. I raised the gun to my shoulder and took aim. And just at that mo-

ment I caught the old man's eyes fixed full upon me. So might my father have looked upon his murderers. I could not, it was impossible; and throwing down the gun I turned away.

At once the captain dealt me a buffet that stretched me on the ground, a volley rang out, and when I rose again all was over. The old man, riddled with bullets, had fallen face forwards—brave Master Papillard was dead.

The body was easily disposed of; it was cast over the precipice to feed the vultures, and, amid jeers and taunts, I slunk away to prepare the horses for the travellers.

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT THE LANDSLIP DID FOR ME.

I HAD a hard life of it after this. The captain did not waste another word upon me, but scoffs, sneers, and no small stint of blows became my daily portion from the others. It came to this at last —in sheer despair I acknowledged that I was in fault, and vowed next time not to fail them. My decision was received with shouts of applause. I was made to swear a solemn oath, sealing it with drops of my blood, and then all went right again.

Before this, however, I had made two or three attempts to escape, but always I was discovered and turned back. Once, when I took provisions to the Watch Tower, I strayed beyond the bounds, under pretence of gathering dry wood, meaning to make a rush for it. A bullet was at once sent through my hat, and a second just grazed my shoulder. "That is only by way of warning," they shouted from above, laughing at my discomfiture. "When we aim to hit, we kill."

It was then I gave in, as I said. I felt if fate had doomed me to be a brigand, what use to fight against it? Afterwards, when a way of escape did present itself, the chance came too late; I no longer

desired to take advantage of it. Save that I was still confined to the plateau, I was treated by all as a comrade, and had grown so reconciled to my position, that I no longer cared to change it; I might, perhaps, go farther and fare worse. This was partly owing to Master Papillard. Since he had extinguished the faint hope I once had of discovering my father's name and family, I did not see that I could do better than remain where I was. After all, once the first plunge over, a brigand's life was a merry one, and, save the captain, we called no man master. It was thus I reasoned to myself and strove to stifle an inner voice that would not always be silent.

I must tell you now how it was that I discovered a way of escape, how through sheer accident, as I thought then, a path was opened for me. I was alone in the camp. The band, save those in the Watch Tower, had departed on a distant expedition; I did not expect them back for days. Then one night there arose a great storm of tremendous violence, one of the worst I ever witnessed. The thunder pealed like mighty artillery, echoing and crashing from peak to peak until I thought the mountains were about to fall upon me. And the lightning was terrible. Incessant flashes, which sometimes tore up the ground and burst in balls of fire, until I was fain to close my eyes lest I should be blinded.

I was not particularly frightened. I had led too hardy a life to mind a storm, be it ever so violent; but I was discomposed by the torrents of rain and the wind, and retired within my hut until it should

be over. I was not to escape so easily, however. I had scarce lain down in my old bearskin, curling myself round like a dog for warmth, when I was very effectually startled. There came a mighty thunderclap, directly, as it seemed, above my head, followed immediately by a shower of rocks and stones. The greater part went down the abyss, with a roar that might have been heard for miles, but enough remained to crush in my frail roof and almost to bury me. It was a miracle that I was not killed on the spot; as it was, I escaped with sundry cuts and bruises. I made a rush for the door, thinking, in my fright, surely it was an earthquake; and directly I got outside the wind caught and buffeted me until I was nearly over the precipice. I threw myself flat upon the ground, and crawled along best way I could until I reached the further side of the tower where it was somewhat more sheltered. Here I resolved to remain until daylight, and, notwithstanding my fright, I must have fallen asleep. The next thing I knew, the sun was shining, a soft breeze blowing, naught remained of the storm save the ravages it had left behind it.

I had half expected to find the old castle blown flat to the ground. To my surprise it was little injured; the damage had been confined to my quarter. There had been a landslip on the shelf above, part of which had gone down the abyss, and it was the flying *débris* that had so nearly killed me. Even now a huge pine tree, half uprooted, hung suspended head downwards exactly over my hut; I scarce dared enter to clear away the rubbish, fearing every moment it would fall. If I wanted to

remain in my present quarters it was plain that I must get rid of this tree. On one side it overhung the precipice, and, after looking all round, I fancied that if I could drag it a little more that way a vigorous pull or two might send it over. Full of this idea, I contrived, after infinite difficulty, to pass a rope round the lowest branch, and pulling this way and that, did my best to perform the impossible. The end was, that gradually forgetting my first caution, for I was very near the brink, I gave such a vigorous pull that I lost my footing and swung out over the abyss, the branch bending and swaying ominously above me.

It was not a very pleasant moment.

I could see my body bounding from crag to crag until, a bruised and battered mass, it fell upon the pine trees below.

But my very despair gave me strength. Scarce knowing how I did it, I climbed up desperately, hand over hand, to reach a stouter branch before the one that held me gave way. I succeeded in this; then my terror was that the tree itself was slipping, and on I scrambled, regardless of bleeding face and torn hands, until I stood safely upon the shelf. Once there I saw at a glance how vain had been my fears, how useless my efforts to move the tree. The landslip truly had stretched it prostrate; but its roots, the growth of ages, were still fast anchored in the ground, it would have needed a dozen men at least to stir it.

As soon as I recovered from my first fright I began to look about me with great curiosity; it was so strange to be standing on the inaccessible

shelf I had so often surveyed from below. Save at the outer edge it was bounded on each side by lofty mountains, whose tops seemed to pierce the clouds, and when I turned my back to the precipice, before me was a narrow ravine thickly wooded with pine trees. I plunged within this at once, and wandered here and there, eager to explore its inmost recesses. There was no track, no sign of man anywhere; it seemed almost as if I were the first to set foot in it. And the stillness was profound. As I wandered on—the ground carpeted so thickly with fir needles that my footsteps made no sound—I saw no living creature, nothing moved, save now and again a withered leaf floated slowly to earth. For a time all was still the same, the wooded ravine shut in by bare rock, the sides steep and precipitous, impossible to climb. Then gradually the mountains retreated, the gorge widened and came abruptly to an end. I found myself upon the edge of an almost perpendicular cliff, from whence I could see the lower country, valleys, trees, and plain spread out as on a map before me. In the distance I even fancied I could discern the sun shining upon the high-pitched roofs of a village. But this was far, far away, many leagues of difficult mountain travel still separated me from the nearest habitation. Difficult, yes, but to a strong arm and steady brain not impossible; and as I stood looking down, all at once it flashed across me that I had won my liberty. Evidently this side of the mountain was unknown to the brigands, I had but to keep on and I was free.

For a moment I rejoiced; then came the coward-

ly thought—To what purpose? Why should I put myself in the way of unknown hardships when a merry, easy life was at my hand? No, I would remain where I was, I would keep my word and join the brigands. It was an ignoble determination truly, and though afterwards I had reason to be thankful I stayed my steps, that does not lessen the shame of it.

Notwithstanding this resolution, my discovery was not worthless; on the contrary, it was a great satisfaction to me. For one thing, I had the pleasure of knowing I was able to escape if I chose. But I figured to myself a better way. After I had been admitted to the band, when I was free to come and go as I would, I would bring my chosen comrades the way I had just travelled and show how I could have left them had I wished. I resolved to keep the secret until then, and hugged the idea of my triumph.

It was very easy to get back again; I had but to make the rope secure and descend upon my hut. To go up and down regularly, however, was more difficult, as I had to devise a means that others could not discover. It cost me some time and trouble, and I tried many ways before I hit on the right one; but at last I succeeded in managing it. I cut down nearly all the tree from above, leaving only one short branch exactly above my hut, but to this branch, had anyone looked closely, was attached a loop of thin line. When I stood up on my roof, by the aid of a long hooked stick, I could just reach this loop, and when I pulled it, down came a stout rope with thick knots in it to assist

me in climbing. It was the easier to arrange because beneath the cliff there was always something of a shadow, and I guided the branch into the darkest corner I could find.

After that, whenever the brigands were absent, I climbed up to the shelf every day, and leaving the ravine far behind me, made a track of my own down the mountain side. I descended as far even as a deserted hut I chanced upon in a sheltered nook. It had apparently once sheltered a mountain shepherd, a small inclosure surrounded by a low wall having served as a fold, but it had long been forsaken. The walls of the fold were broken down, the wild goat and the chamois had taken possession, but the little hut of one room was in fair preservation still. Beyond this spot I dared not venture. I was expected at the Watch Tower at certain hours, I had to be careful not to excite suspicion by loitering.

I kept my secret well. When the brigands returned some questions were asked about the storm, and I had to assist in making good the damage to the old castle; but no one cast a glance towards my little hut, no one had the slightest suspicion of my great discovery. They brought no prisoners again, the Thousand Devils were now so well known that few travellers worth robbing dared attempt the passes. They had to go farther afield each time, sometimes even despoiling a far-off village, and when that was the case they seldom encumbered themselves with captives.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CAPTAIN'S VENGEANCE BEGINS.

At length the day dawned that was to alter my whole life, to change indeed my very nature.

I had perceived for some time that something serious was on foot. Messengers—for the most part disguised as beggars—were constantly coming and going, and the captain himself spent most of his time at the Watch Tower. And yet for once the men did not seem over pleased with the prospect. There was much overhauling of arms and furbishing of accoutrements, and as they worked a few of them looked almost sullen and as if, had they dared, they would have grumbled. As it was, I overheard one mutter to another, "Mark me, Antonio, there will be more blows than crowns in this bout. I like not flying at so high game."

"Tush, man," answered the other, "the captain knows what he is about. Besides, has he not promised that his share of the booty shall be ours, he will claim nothing but the prisoners?"

"And the ransom?"

"They will not be put to ransom, a chance for Jean at last. 'Tis the captain's enemy; he has sworn not to spare his life."

"'Twill bring bad luck, you see. A dozen of fat citizens would never be missed, but when it comes to carrying off a noble it will bring trouble. Besides, they are sure to have a large escort; we may even get the worst of it."

"Pshaw! Can you not trust the captain? Is he not noble himself? He will know how to manage. Hush, here he comes; best not let him hear you or he will think we have a coward among us."

The whole band rode off the next day before dawn, returning, rather to my surprise, for I had not expected them back so soon, early the following morning. They had been riding all night, making all the haste they could to reach their retreat before daylight. They came back fewer in number than they went, and many were sore wounded. Some of the men were even unable to climb the steep, and had to be left at the Watch Tower below.

They had met with a stiff resistance, that was very clear; indeed, I soon found they had narrowly escaped being beaten. Had not part of the escort turned cowards and fled, there would have been a different tale.

As it was, they had succeeded; one glance at the captain's face told me that—not to speak of the booty with which they were loaded, and the little group of prisoners. I had only a passing glimpse of these latter, as they were carefully escorted to the tower, yet I fancied I caught sight of a woman's gown. I felt my time had come at last; before the next day dawned I should be one of the Thousand Devils.

For some hours there was the usual commotion,

then, after noon, when the men had eaten and rested, the prisoners were brought forth. I saw them plainly enough now—three men, a boy, and a young girl. One long horrified look, because at first I could not believe my eyes, and I recognised two of them: the Marquis of Suresne and the demoiselle his daughter, whose life I had once saved. She was older now, and her face pale as death with grief and terror. As well it might be, for the conflict had come so close that her dress was deeply stained with blood—the blood of those who had tried to defend her.

The Marquis was badly wounded. He had fought as a brave gentleman would until overpowered by numbers; it was only owing to the strenuous endeavours of the captain they had been able to bring him off the field alive.

I guessed at once who the boy was, a lad of some eleven years. He bore not the slightest resemblance to his dark-eyed sister, but he clung to her so closely (I remembered the widow's words), it could be none other than her brother. And, besides, his hair showed that he was a noble. Except over the forehead, where it was cut short and straight, it hung down nearly to his shoulders; a distinguishing mark permitted only, as everyone knows, to children of good birth. For the rest, the young Monsieur Louis was a slight sickly-looking boy, with retreating brow, watery eyes, and pale thin lips. He was richly dressed in black velvet embroidered with gold, and the plume in his little cap was still fastened with a costly jewel. The demoiselle, his sister, had been more in the wars;

her long gown of grey and silver was stained, as I have said, and torn and rent as well, and some rude hand had snatched her hood.

The little monsieur seemed almost beside himself with terror. He cried and whimpered as he clung to his sister's dress, and looked the very picture of despair. Mademoiselle de Suresne, on the contrary, regardless of her fears, held herself erect and gazed around undauntedly.

The other two were strangers, but one, an old man, with grey hair, surmounted by a close-fitting cap, soon turned out to be tutor to the young lord; the other was a public notary. The Demoiselle of Suresne was on her way to be given in marriage to a cousin, and the notary was in charge of the marriage contract.

The Marquis had to be assisted in walking. He was too much hurt to stand upright, and yet they had bound his arms. But he did not flinch, and when confronted with the captain he gave him back look for look bold as his own. He recognised my master; they were enemies of old. Indeed, it was to the Marquis of Suresne and his brother that the Captain of the Thousand Devils ascribed his ruin. He had laid his plans well, he meant to be revenged on them both. The Marquis knew his fate was sealed, he wasted no words concerning himself, yet even his proud spirit stooped to beg for mercy to his children. I was becoming hardened as the rest, yet I quailed before the look of devilish malignity upon the captain's face whilst his enemy was speaking. Then with an evil smile he answered slowly: "I think I may promise that

not one hair of their heads shall be hurt. I do not fancy that the young Marquis—as he soon will be—will refuse my conditions. As to your daughter, I destine her to great honour. I see by the papers found amongst your baggage that you meant to bestow her hand upon that puny fop, her cousin. What has he? Nothing. What is his father? Your half-brother truly, yet a mere hanger-on at a petty Italian court. I will do better for her than that. I am of rank equal to your own, my wealth is untold—for I can always replenish my treasury—she shall become my wife, and Queen of the Thousand Devils."

"You villain! You demon!" cried the wretched father. "Rather would I see her stretched dead at my feet!" and he strove to wrench himself free.

"Nay, calm yourself, my friend," returned the captain, mockingly, "your struggles will but accelerate the end. You have not heard me out yet. On my honour I will treat the lady with all consideration. She shall not become my wife, I give you my word, unless she agrees willingly, and has also the consent of the young Marquis, her brother. And everything shall be in due form. The notary, whose life I will spare for the purpose, shall draw up the contract, I have already sent for the priest, the chapel is close at hand, all shall be in order, I assure you. I will not even tell the lady what is false, I will not say, as I might, that it was her father's dying wish." And he smiled again, enjoying his victim's sufferings to the full. "You robbed me of a bride once, remember; it is but just you

should supply me with another. But it shall be as I say. You know of old I always keep my word. I will not wed her against her will."

"Ah, but how will you make her willing, demon? What devilish plot have you devised now? Hear me, Edmée"—and the Marquis raised his voice that his words might reach his children.

But the captain, who never forgot anything, had seen to that beforehand. The demoiselle and her brother, surrounded by a little group of guards, were stationed on a hillock at some distance. They could see their father, could see everything that passed; but weakened as the marquis was from loss of blood, they were too far off for his faint voice to reach them.

"It is useless, you see," continued the captain, when, with a refinement of cruelty, he had allowed the prisoner to try his utmost. "Your last words to them have been spoken. Have you anything more to say to me before you die?"

"Wretch, I would see a priest. Would you have me die unshriven?"

"Ay, that would I. My vengeance would pursue you in the next world even as in this. I will not even give your body burial. I will shoot you down like a dog, then your worthless carcase shall be tossed over the cliff, carrion for the vultures to peck at."

"And my son, my son?" cried the unhappy man, in heartrending tones.

"Have no fear. Your son shall go free; it suits my purpose better. When, as the head of his house, he has given me his sister in marriage, he shall

leave the camp unharmed; I swear it. What may happen to him after, you best know, from my knowledge of his uncle I scarce think he is likely to inherit. Cheated of his bride and his bride's dowry, monsieur your brother may seek to console himself with Suresne instead. Ah, that touches you! It is so true you know, and he will be your son's guardian. You do not seem very pleased, yet, after all, 'tis but a fair return. You robbed me at one blow of bride, home, and name. For the bride, I console myself with your daughter; my home is here; my name—such as it is, such as you have made it—I give to her."

"Devil, have you no mercy, not mercy enough to let her die by my side?"

My master laughed aloud.

"Not I. I promise myself many happy hours with my fair young bride. But 'tis time we made an end of this, the priest comes, the marriage hour is at hand; my only grief is that you cannot live to see it. Unfortunately, if I waited I should lose part of my vengeance, you would cheat me out of the pleasure of killing you. Unbind his arms, knaves, and set him against the wall yonder; so, that will do, let him stand alone. Now, Monsieur le Marquis, your last hour has come."

There were loud cries for Jean, and those nearest pushed me forward. I know not to this day whether I could have killed him; happily I was spared the decision. The captain thrust me aside with an oath.

"Back, boy, this is not for you, 'tis a pleasure reserved for myself." Then raising his musket he

levelled it at the marquis, who, making one last effort, stood fearlessly erect. Thrice the captain took aim, and each time just as we expected him to fire, he lowered the piece again and spoke cruel taunting words to his enemy. But my lord said no more, he only waved his hand once to his children; and the demoiselle, still unfaltering, waved hers in return. The boy saw nothing. His sister's arm pressed him close to her side, his face was hidden in her gown. Nor did the demoiselle shrink even when her father fell, as presently he did, pierced to the heart with a bullet. She only clasped the boy tighter with both hands, as if she would defend his life with hers.

"Good, good," muttered the captain, who had looked for a moment her way, "I think the rest of my task will be easy. Are you dead yet, dog?" and he kicked the body with his foot.

This also the demoiselle saw.

Two or three of the men, anxious to please, hurried forward to dispose of the dead marquis in the usual fashion; but the captain waved them off threateningly.

"Back, knaves!" he cried. "You were not so pressing when blows were passing down below." And raising the body himself, he bore it by his own unaided strength to the cliff, cast it over, and stood watching as it bounded from crag to crag, until, a bruised and mangled mass, it was lost to view. Then, and then only, was the first part of his vengeance sated, and he turned with renewed zest to complete it.

All this the demoiselle had watched from her

point of vantage, gazing with wide open eyes as if fascinated by horror. Without sound or cry she had watched every detail of the dismal tragedy, her one conscious action being to shield the boy. Poor lady, her time had now come.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CAPTAIN'S VENGEANCE COMPLETED.

AFTER a few words with Gottlieb, the captain seated himself upon the bench where he judged the prisoners, and called for Mademoiselle de Suresne and the others to be brought before him. Hard by was an upright beam, where many a poor wretch had been hung, and here two ropes were now being made ready—for the notary and the tutor I concluded at once. They were to be hung, not shot, so that it would be no affair of mine. I was not to gain my freedom this time, and I was not sorry.

I was faint-hearted still. The captain's bloodthirsty revenge had sickened me. The brigands stood around in a semi-circle, as was their wont, eager for any deed of cruelty, and presently into the midst of them stepped the four prisoners. Mademoiselle de Suresne walked first, holding her brother by the hand. The boy clung to her skirts and impeded her footsteps, causing her at times to stumble; save for that she held herself erect as a queen, and faced us all undauntedly. It was marvellous to see such forced composure in one so young. The tutor followed at a little distance, walking with difficulty, for he also had been wounded;

then came the notary shaking in every limb. This last, however, was put out of the circle at once; the captain gave a short order and he was taken away again. There remained only the three, and I noticed with dismay that the man fingering the rope stood ominously close to the demoiselle.

But now the captain began to speak, and, addressing the lad as Monsieur le Marquis, commanded him sternly to raise his head. I do not think either of them understood at first; the boy never moved, and the demoiselle looked around vaguely as if in search of her murdered father. A second command, spoken this time in a voice of thunder, effectually roused her. She whispered in her brother's ear, and, unloosing his grasp, made him advance a pace forwards.

"Monsieur le Marquis de Suresne," repeated the captain, "I have the honour to be the first to salute you by your new title," and, rising, he took off his hat and bowed with such a flourish of mock courtesy, that the feathers in it swept the ground. Then putting on a look that had daunted many, he cried sternly, "Monsieur le Marquis, yon shot you heard just now sent your father to feed the vultures, have you aught to say why you should not follow him?"

The boy sank upon his knees and howled for mercy. He was but young, it is true, still he seemed to have not a spark of courage in him.

"Rise, my lord," continued the captain, with a contemptuous air. "It would be a sin, methinks, to rob France of such a brave youth. If you go on as you have begun, your king will have reason

to be proud of you. Fear nothing; I have no wish to hurt you, your fate is in your own hands. I would be your friend, nay, more than your friend, your brother," and he laughed and chuckled with amusement. "Rise, sir, I say, and we will treat as equals, man to man."

The boy rose to his feet and gazed around him fearfully.

"I do not like this place," he whimpered. "If you are my friend, let me go; I want my servants, my own people, I do not want to stay here."

"Exactly so, Monsieur le Marquis. These rough dogs are no fit attendants for a great noble. Your people—those who took to their heels, at least—have halted, I doubt not, at the village below; if we can come to terms you shall be conducted to them in safety."

"If it is money you want, I am rich; I can pay a large ransom," said the young lord, a little more boldly. "If my father is dead, as you say, everything is mine; is it not so, Edmée? Is it not so, Monsieur Anleye?" and he turned towards his sister and the tutor.

The old gentleman began to speak, but the captain silenced him roughly. The demoiselle only bowed her head; she did not take her eyes off my master. I think she doubted much what was coming. Then the captain answered the boy's words with:

"Nay, Monsieur le Marquis, there can be no question of ransom, believe me. This is an affair between gentlemen, nothing to do with money. But I suppose you do not know; permit me to

introduce myself"—and he rose again—"I am René Auguste, Baron de Riancourt, at your service. My birth is noble as your own, my family more ancient. I was once robbed of my destined bride, for years I mourned her loss, but time has softened my grief. I am desirous now, with your permission, to ally myself to your honourable family. Monsieur le Marquis"—with another sweeping bow—"give me mademoiselle, your sister, to wife, and you shall go free."

There was a slight murmur of applause among the men, at once repressed by the captain. They were in the best of tempers. Their double share of the booty had quite made up for the hard knocks; they were enjoying the scene mightily.

The demoiselle shivered and shrank back a little, the only sign she gave of having heard. I do not think she took the project seriously.

The mildness of the captain's manner, the hope of release, had somewhat restored the young lord's self-possession, and for a short time the instincts of his race held sway over him. Returning the captain's bow with an air that showed he had been well taught, he said, with more dignity than I thought was in him:

"Monsieur le Baron, you do us great honour; unfortunately, what you ask is impossible; Mademoiselle de Suresne is even now on her way to be given in marriage to a cousin."

My master smiled grimly. "On her way, yes; but no vows have passed, I trow; I much fear me that marriage will come to naught. The lady is not even formally betrothed. I know all about it,

you see. Should you think fit to give your sister to another, there is nothing to prevent it. You are head of the family, the matter rests solely with you. Your notary is at hand to draw up the contract, a priest to pronounce the marriage blessing is even now waiting; afterwards you may go free."

"Monsieur le Baron de Riancourt," and the boy still spoke firmly, though his lips were beginning to tremble, "I am sorry to appear discourteous, but I must repeat I regret I am compelled to decline the honour of your alliance." Then suddenly turning with some petulance to his sister, "Edmée, why do you not help me; why do you not assure Monsieur le Baron that what he asks is impossible?"

The captain checked him at once. "Not at all, monsieur, we will not trouble the lady yet. It would be contrary to good manners to press my suit upon her before obtaining your permission. You refuse?"

"Decidedly, monsieur; it is too great an honour," and forgetting himself for a moment the lad's lips curled in scorn.

The captain raised his hand. In an instant a rope was round the boy's neck, and he was drawn, struggling and shrieking, towards the beam.

"Edmée, save me, save me!" he wailed in tones of agony.

The demoiselle uttered a loud scream, and, rushing to his side, flung her arms about him. "You cowards, you cowards!" she cried, her pale face crimson with wrath. "You poor, pitiful cowards, to torture thus a helpless boy."

"Pardon, mademoiselle," returned the captain,

" it is his own doing. I really have no wish to hurt him, but it is necessary he should be taught reason. I think, perhaps, one lesson will suffice, afterwards it will rest with you. Loose the rope, knave, but do not take it from my lord's neck, for it may be needed again. Stay, though, that the young gentleman may know we are in earnest; string me up the other. Let him see what it means to be hanged."

The tutor gave a hoarse cry as the rope was flung over him; next moment he was dangling from the beam, his face contorted and black, his limbs twitching convulsively. As he swung to and fro in his death agony, the boy watched him as if spell-bound, until he almost swooned with horror. Then the captain took up the word again:

" Monsieur le Marquis, what do you say to me now? Once more I have the honour to demand of you the hand of Mademoiselle de Suresne."

" Edmée, what am I to do? You could not let me die like that," and he sobbed aloud.

The demoiselle put her arm around him; then, turning to the captain, she said calmly:

" Monsieur, has not this jest been carried far enough? "

" It is no jest, fair lady, but deadly earnest, as you will find to your cost if you cross me; I never jest on such matters. You will become my wife, with your brother's consent and your own, or he hangs on the beam like yon carrion. Believe me, there is no other way out of it. But 'tis for him to decide first. Marquis of Suresne, for the last time, will you give me your sister to wife? " And the rope was pulled a little tighter.

"I will, I will," he shrieked, tearing at it frantically. "Edmée, you promised to care for me always; you swore to my mother, you have told me so often, you cannot let me die now!"

The demoiselle gazed into my master's face as if even now she could not believe he was in earnest, a look which cut me to the heart, it was so pitiful. At sight of her all my old feelings, the hopes and aspirations I had so long forgotten, came back to me; I would have given my life to save her. Yet what could I do? I was less than the meanest among them, I dared not even let them see I was sorry for her; and yet it was a sight to move the hardest when that proud young girl, humbling herself to the dust, went down on her knees to crave for mercy. Alas! the man to whom she knelt knew not the meaning of the word, only it pleased him to see her at his feet, and he dallied and paltered to keep her there. She perceived his aim at length, and, rising with an air of disdain, as if vexed with herself for having stooped so low, went back to her place beside her brother.

"Louis, be brave," she said softly. "Remember what our father always taught us; death is better than dishonour. I will not leave you, we will die together."

There was another slight pull to the rope—Gottlieb had his hand upon it now—and the boy screamed:

"I do not want to die, I am marquis now, it is your place to obey me. You are only a woman, you must marry as I say."

"Louis, look up, play the man for once; re-

member you are a Suresne. Look up, I say, and tell me what is on that hand, on the hand of the man you would have me marry."

The boy looked. We all looked. No one had noticed it before; but the captain's right hand was deeply stained with blood, which he must have acquired when lifting his victim.

"It is our father's blood, Louis," the demoiselle continued, "and it is not yet dry. I would throw myself from the cliff rather than marry him."

The captain made another sign. He was fast losing patience; besides, I think the incident of the bloodstain nettled him. He was vexed with himself for not having removed it, vexed with the girl for perceiving it. Anyhow, the rope was drawn to some purpose this time, and the boy was lifted off his feet, shrieking to his sister to save him.

The poor demoiselle clung to him while she could, but when, regardless of her cries and tears, she was dragged away, she rushed once more to the captain, and throwing herself upon the ground clasped his knees.

"Take my life for his, I give it freely, but spare, oh, spare the helpless boy!"

"Will you be my wife?"

"I cannot, I cannot!" and she wrung her hands in despair. "My father's blood is between us, he would curse me from his grave."

The boy's cries came fainter and fainter, as if he were choking.

"Ask me anything but that," she cried in agony. "Ask me to wed the vilest and meanest of your

band and I will do it; but not you, not you, not the murderer of my father."

The captain laughed aloud—a laugh partly to conceal his mortification. He had made a mistake; he should not have allowed her to witness her father's death. But he was not baffled yet.

"Say you so, fair lady?" and he laughed again. "Then I will put you to the test, I will give you one more chance. Ho, there, let the young lord down, and come you here, Jean the horse-boy."

I came to the front trembling in every limb, yet resolved to be torn to pieces rather than do one hurt to the demoiselle. A pretty figure I was to stand before a noble lady. Bare-armed and bare-legged, my clothes hanging about me in rags, my long hair matted with dirt, I looked as bad a ruffian as the worst of them. I was abashed to be called at all. When I heard the captain's purpose my wits, I think, quite left me; in all that followed afterwards I acted as in a dream.

"Behold! my lady," the captain said, pointing his finger towards where I stood. "This is our meanest, Jean the horse-boy, who kennels in the stables, a no-man's brat, a waif I picked from the gutter, and a coward to boot. What say you, will you join your fortunes to his? Will you accept him as your husband? 'Tis he or I; time is pressing, choose between us speedily."

The demoiselle cast upon me one glance of inexpressible disgust, then turned away as if she could not bear the sight.

"Edmée, Edmée!" once more wailed the boy,

and his voice was faint and low as if his strength were leaving him.

The poor lady turned again quickly. "Be it so, I accept him. For my brother's life I will do even this. He is to go free, to quit your camp at once—yet how can I tell you will keep your word?"

"Be easy, mademoiselle, I always keep my word, even to my own hurt, as when I promised your father not to wed you against your will. Directly the bonds are fast tied your brother shall depart unharmed to rejoin his friends. But bethink you, Demoiselle of Suresne"—and he made a step forward and held out his hand—"bethink you once more before you decide. I am your equal in birth; if you married me you would live in yonder tower and be treated as a queen, not a man of them durst cast a bold look at you. As wife of the horse-boy" —and he shrugged his shoulders—"I should hardly take trouble to protect you then."

Alas! he had again forgotten that accusing stain. It was plain on his hand still, and she turned away with a shiver.

"I choose the horse-boy. Afterwards I can but die." These last words were breathed rather than spoken, only I, who was close beside her, caught the sense of them.

"Very good, fair lady," returned the captain, with one of his dreadful smiles, "though I think it will not be long before you regret it. Now bring forth master notary and his ink-horn. He is to draw up a second contract word for word as the one he has with him, save only the name and pos-

sessions of the bridegroom. And, mind you, my fine fellow," as the trembling man of law was dragged into his presence, "not a word too little or too much, not a word that would render the contract void, or I send you to feed the vultures. Stay, though, I have forgotten one thing, and that not the least important. Monsieur le Marquis, come hither. Nay, do not remove his necklace, a squeeze may still be needed. Monsieur, I regret to say that as mademoiselle, your sister, is unwilling to receive me as a suitor, I resign, albeit reluctantly, my pretensions to her hand. Another gentleman has been more fortunate in winning her favour. As his nearest friend I pray you now to bestow your sister upon Jean the horse-boy. It is not an alliance to be proud of, truly; but 'tis the lady will have it so. Perhaps 'tis Jean's blue eyes. See how he is staring, as if he could not believe his good fortune." Then dropping his mockery—"Now, boy, do you consent, ay or no?"

"I consent," answered the boy, trembling all over, and his shaking hand stole up to the rope.

"You hear, master notary? Draw up your paper quickly. When it is ready Monsieur le Marquis and the bride and bridegroom will sign and seal it. Come, Jean, do not look so startled, you have won a fair bride and a noble inheritance, you will be a rich man if only you live to take possession," and there was a smile on his face that boded me small good.

I looked down. I dared not meet his eyes, dreading lest he should discover the horror and loathing he had at last aroused in me. For much

as I hated him I feared him still more. I was too thoroughly cowed not to keep silence.

Whilst the notary was writing, Mademoiselle de Suresne knelt by the side of her brother, fondling and calming him as if he were a child. Yet, now and again her head drooped, her lips faltered, and I heard her pray brokenly for strength to endure to the end.

I still remained close beside her. I dared not move from where I had been ordered to stand; but after that one glance she never looked at me.

Presently the notary ceased for a moment from his scratching, and, looking up, said, "Jean, Jean what? There must be a second name?"

The captain laughed aloud. "Nay, a no-man's brat he, his cradle the gutter, his shelter my stables. Jean, varlet, hast thou a second name?"

"Write me down Jean, son of John of Strathbourne," I returned, making a vain effort to gather my courage together.

"And who may he be, pray?"

"I know not, but he was my father."

"'Tis a wise child that knows its own father. It sounds English; some drunken trooper maybe, quartered for a time in your mother's village. Set it down, master notary, set it down; 'twill do as well as another. We shall need your signature, Jean, son of John of Strathbourne. Canst write?"

I shook my head.

"It would have been strange if you could. You will make a cross the same as your betters."

When the time came for the contract to be signed, the demoiselle rose, impassive as a statue, a

bearing she maintained to the end. She wrote her name in the place pointed out to her; I made my mark; the young marquis signed; and the captain and Gottlieb, and Antonio of Milan all set their names as witnesses. When all was done my master rolled up the paper and gave it into my hands, saying, "This is yours, keep it for the present until it is needed to claim your wife's fortune. Here is money to put on the book for the priest's dues, everything shall be in order," and he gave me a handful of gold. "We need nothing now but the rings. Bring the one the merchant gave you, it shall be your gift to the bride; the lady has one, I see, upon her finger still, which will serve for you. Go fetch it and come quickly to the chapel."

I obeyed without a word, struck helpless with fear, such a spell had that dread man cast upon me.

After that all was quickly over. I stood in the chapel beside the noble demoiselle, we repeated the words they told us, I took her hand in mine, we exchanged rings—though, indeed, hers was so small it would not go over the joint of my finger, and I lost it very soon afterwards. Nothing happened, no miracle from Heaven came to prevent such a shameful wrong; Edmée of Suresne was the wife of Jean the horse-boy.

CHAPTER IX.

MY BRIDE.

DIRECTLY the ceremony was at an end, my master, with one of his horrible chuckling laughs, cried loudly:

"Madame, allow me to be the first to congratulate you; your husband is a happy man. Jean the horse-boy, kiss your bride," whilst the others took up the cry, "*Vive* Jean! *Vive* the happy couple! Jean, be not bashful, kiss your bride."

For the first time since she had entered the chapel the demoiselle lifted her head and gazed at us steadily.

I cannot explain what there was in her look, but for the first time I began to realise something of what I had done, and even the captain quailed. To cover his confusion he laughed again, then turned away, roughly ordering the men to get the horses ready for the travellers.

"For our Jean must have a holiday to-day, is it not so?" recovering his self-possession. "We will have a great feast in honour of this happy bridal." Meantime, the demoiselle was kneeling again beside her brother, in such an agony of grief that even the

brigands for a time respected it. They spared her their rude jests, and went about their business in silence.

The next event was the departure of the young marquis. Everything of value was taken from him. His rich dress, his jewelled cap, even his leathern riding boots, and he was given a coarse garb that once had clothed a peasant. This indignity seemed to trouble him more than parting from his sister. He manifested little grief, only assuring her again and again he would soon return with a troop of men-at-arms to rescue her. "As for the marriage," I heard him whisper, "she need not trouble. If 'twas a real priest, his uncle would send to Rome, it would be made naught."

"It would be naught very soon," she echoed, becoming more calm as the moment of his departure approached. "And, Louis—if we never meet again —remember, as you grow older, you must become more brave, you must not allow bad men to frighten you." She clung to him for a second, kissing his cheeks, his lips, his brow—then stood aside as he departed with never a look behind him. At the head of the zig-zag he was blindfolded, and she watched him afterwards down the path, bending forward to catch the very last glimpse; whilst I, mindful of her last words, drew closer and closer to her side. The cliff was so near at hand, it would be so easy to cast herself down. I need not have feared; she remembered her brother still. The boy was not yet in safety, he was not yet out of the brigands' hands. The notary went with them, he had bought his life by his labours, the priest went

also; the demoiselle was alone with the Thousand Devils.

The poor lady gazed until the last winding of the path hid her brother from sight; then, without a word or cry, she fell prostrate to the earth. She was not unconscious, that mercy was denied her, only her strength was spent and gone.

The brigands gathered round, some laughing, some curious, a few even a little compassionate, but I waved them back fiercely. My courage had come to me at last, I felt as if I could defy them all. This unhappy lady, this noble demoiselle, whose finger-tips I was not worthy to touch—they had given me a right to protect her—I would save her or I would die.

"Back!" I cried; "the captain has given her to me, to me, not one of you shall touch her."

The captain was looking on, amused by my sudden self-assertion, yet with a devilish gleam in his bloodshot eyes.

"The boy is right," he said carelessly. "Let him alone for the present, afterwards we will see. Take her to your kennel, hound; keep her out of harm's way until the bridal feast is ready. No dallying near the cliff, mind; your life shall answer for her safety. Madame shall queen it at the feast to-night, we will drink deep in honour of the bride and bridegroom."

There was a roar of applause, and, before it subsided, I raised the demoiselle in my arms and sought to carry her away. She would have resisted. She shrank from my touch as if it had been pollution; yet she had no strength left to struggle.

"Trust me, I am a friend," I whispered in her ear.

"A friend, you!" and she looked at me with eyes filled with deadly fear. "Let me go, let me go!" But I only clasped her the tighter.

Once within my hut, once out of sight of those villains, I knew I should be able to save her. Only one moment of danger, I thought—as we climbed upwards to the cliff—and we might be far away before they even missed us. And so it might have been, there was nothing to hinder, save the obstinacy of the demoiselle herself. Had she done as I wished she might have been on her way to rejoin her brother that night.

Directly we were within the hut she struggled to her feet, and this time I did not prevent her. Only I closed the door and made it fast, that no one might come within. None had dared follow us after the captain's words; still, it was just as well to make sure. Then I turned to the demoiselle eager to unfold my plan. She had retreated to the farthest corner, where, from behind a rude bench I had made to serve as table, she stood looking at me defiantly.

"Mademoiselle de Suresne, I am a friend," I said softly, trying to reassure her. "I would serve you; I would not harm a hair of your head."

She made no answer, save by that one steady look of proud defiance.

"Mademoiselle, I swear it. I beg of you to believe me."

Then she spoke. "If you be my friend, leave me; go, never let me see your face again."

I shook my head. "For your own sake, Mademoiselle, I dare not; others might take my place who would treat you with less courtesy. I can do better than leave you, I can help you to escape. Hear me now."

Her eyes lit up, she listened eagerly; but before I had half finished I could see her hopes had fallen again. Indeed, her look grew so incredulous, so scornful, that I stopped abruptly, saying:

"You do not believe me?"

"Not one word. How should I?"

How should she, indeed? What reason had she to trust me?

Then to show I meant well, I spoke of that incident in the past; reminded her of the peasant boy who had saved her life.

"What of it?" she cried, though I could see she was somewhat taken by surprise.

"I am that boy," I answered. "I am Jean who once lived with the Widow Desfougères. I helped you then, will you not trust me to help you out of a worse peril now?"

"You, you, that boy—and you have turned to this? Truly, I think it would have been better had Mère Marie left you to perish by the roadside where she found you."

"Perhaps it would," I answered sharply, beginning to lose patience; we were wasting valuable time. "But since she did not, since I stand here alive before you, will you not believe that at least I would be your friend?"

"My friend!—you! Brigand! churl! you dare to call yourself my friend? You forget to whom

you are speaking. Had you been my friend, would you have taken part in that mockery just now?"

"How could I help myself?" I retorted sullenly. "If not I, it would have been another. Besides, I was afraid. I dared not disobey him."

"Then you are a coward."

"Ay, an you will; he told you so himself. Any way, I am afraid of the captain. Mademoiselle de Suresne, for the last time—I will not ask you any more—will you trust yourself to me?—will you fly this place while you can?"

"Never, not with you. If your wild story be true, let me escape by myself; I may believe in your friendship then."

"It is impossible. You could not scale the cliff alone, and afterwards you would but wander in the woods, and perish miserably. 'Twould be more merciful to cast you over the cliff at once."

"Were I outside I would save you the trouble."

I took no notice of this, and only repeated, "You will not come, then?"

"No! a thousand times no!" and she stamped her foot. "Cannot you understand that I do not believe one word, that I loathe and abhor you, that if I could I would strike you dead where you stand?"

Then, her short-lived passion exhausted, she burst into a storm of tears.

I said no more; there seemed nothing left for me to say, though, in truth, I was inwardly raging. To have safety so near at hand, and to lose it for

such folly. I would have served her so faithfully, and yet she would not trust me. Had she been a woman of my own kind I would have gripped her by the shoulder and shaken her until her senses came; to the Demoiselle of Suresne I could do nothing. I was too angry to make allowances for her terrible position; it seemed to me sheer foolishness. After this there fell a strange silence between us, I standing at my old post beside the door, mademoiselle in the far corner watching my slightest movement.

By that time it began to grow dusk. It was still light outside, but in my little hut, lighted only by the hole in the roof, the shadows soon thickened. It was the demoiselle who first broke the silence. I had made up my mind I would not be the first to speak. It might have been cruel, I think it was, but I did not know how to deal with fine ladies. The silence and the darkness together, I fancy, rather daunted the lady's courage, for presently she began gently:

"Monsieur Jean, I am sorry——"

"I am no monsieur," I interrupted rudely; "I am plain Jean the horse-boy."

"Jean, I wish to ask your pardon; I did not mean what I said just now."

"That you did not believe me?"

"No, no, that is, of course; but I did not really wish to strike you dead. I spoke in my passion. I pray you to forgive me."

"I have nothing to forgive, mademoiselle; it is not for you to ask my pardon. I am only sorry you will not trust me."

"Yes, I do, a little, now. If you are my friend, as you say, give me the knife you carry in your belt."

I hesitated. "To what purpose? Will you promise not to harm yourself with it?"

"Certainly not," and she grew angry again. "A gentleman, a friend, even, would have complied without question. You behave like the churl you are, and yet would have me trust you!"

Once more I was silent, and the shadows lengthened until I could scarce distinguish her face. I was rather surprised we had been left alone so long. I could only suppose the brigands were making such great preparations they were not ready for us. Still, I knew their coming could not be delayed much longer; after all, why should she not have the knife."

"Noble lady, I was wrong," I said. "We shall be called to the feast presently. I am only the horse-boy, I have no power to protect you. There is the knife, or, if it please you better—since you prefer death to freedom—just behind where you stand is the cliff. I can move the stones, then one spring and all will be over."

"Move them quickly, then," clutching at the knife, and hiding it in her dress as she spoke, "it is a pity you did not think of it before."

I obeyed without more words, and had opened a small space, when, a sudden thought striking me, I said, still working on, "I suppose you understand, mademoiselle, that if you cast yourself down I must follow your example?"

"Why so? What has my fate to do with

yours?" and there was a ring of the old scorn in her voice.

"You heard what the captain said—my life was to answer for yours."

"You can escape by this wonderful way you spoke of just now. If it is all that you say you will have no trouble."

I threw away the last stone. The way was open.

"I follow you, lady. I am a churl it is true, but I could not do that; I should feel a coward all my life after."

"It is folly, I am nothing to you, nothing at all," she persisted.

I saw what was in her mind. She imagined I was claiming some right to her, taking advantage of that cruel mockery in the chapel, and I did not know what words to use to set her right.

"Mademoiselle de Suresne," I cried desperately, "what is the use of my answering you. What is the use of my speaking at all, when you refuse to believe a word? You are to me as you have ever been, the Seigneur's daughter, the noble demoiselle of the château. There can be nothing between us, save the greatest reverence on one side, a gracious condescension—such as it pleased you once to show me in days long ago—on the other. Nothing else is possible, how should it be? Believe me or not, as you will, it is the truth."

The demoiselle was silent for a space, then, coming to my side, she put her hand in mine. "Jean, I will trust you, take me where you will." I held it fast and signed to her to listen. A party of the

brigands were making their way towards us, shouting out a ribald song in notice of their approach.

"Too late, too late!" I almost screamed, I was so savage at such senseless delay. If she meant to go at all why not at first when there would have been no difficulty? "Five minutes, three minutes ago, and we might have managed it. Now——"

Yet, even while I was speaking, I pushed her aside, and scrambling like a squirrel to the roof, dragged down the rope through the hole. Well was it for us that we had not to go outside. The voices came nearer, they were singing loud as they could bawl, but as yet we in the hut were screened from sight by an angle of the ruined buildings.

"Mademoiselle," I cried breathlessly, "if, indeed, you mean to trust me you must do exactly as I say. Put your arms about my neck and keep your eyes shut close; whatever happens, whatever you may hear, do not open them." My dread was that as we neared the height she might turn giddy and fall. "Promise me this and we will chance it."

"I promise on one condition, that you will let me die rather than fall into the hands of those wicked men."

"That is very simple. I have but to let go and we shall be dashed to pieces. Quick now, clasp me tight," and, fearing to trust only to her slight hold, I wound the lower rope round and round us. "Now shut your eyes and hold fast, and may Heaven have mercy upon us both."

It was a risk indeed; I made sure they would see us, and if they fired we were lost. Even if they missed, I was quite certain, did the captain know

the way we were gone, he would find means to follow us.

Burdened as I was, I could not mount very fast, and I had scarce emerged from the shelter of the hut when the men came full in view. The demoiselle heard, though she could not see them, I felt her shudder from head to foot.

"Have no fear," I muttered in her ear. "It may be death, but they shall never touch you alive." I had only to give the rope a jerk and we were over the abyss.

They seemed tipsy already by the noise they made, and I waited, with my head just above the roof, until they gathered round the door. Happily there were not many, not more than about half-a-dozen—Gottlieb and some others sent to summon us. Thank Heaven the captain did not come himself; our chance then would have been small indeed.

Directly they reached the door Gottlieb struck upon it with his fist, calling me with a drunken laugh, to come forth. His companions gathered around listening eagerly, and, at once taking advantage of their attention being thus engaged, I began to climb upwards with all speed. I strained every nerve to get away, but the demoiselle weighed me down, and my very anxiousness, I think, made me slower. I kept missing the loops I had made for foothold.

Gottlieb waited a few moments; then one rough kick sent my poor door flying, and they rushed in. It was the hole in the wall that saved us. At the same time they saw that the hut was empty; they saw I had removed the stones, and their ex-

clamations of dismay, their oaths and curses, came up to us only too plainly.

The demoiselle shivered, but I whispered her that all was going well, and as they scattered along the edge of the abyss, throwing themselves flat upon the ground to peer over, we swayed backwards and forwards above their heads. Two or three rushed off, without a look behind, to summon the captain. We crept higher and higher; then at last, and not a moment too soon, we were at the top. I clutched at the roots of the old tree and rolled over on to firm ground. We were free.

CHAPTER X.

THE JOURNEY—FIRST STAGE—THE PINE WOOD.

I QUICKLY disengaged the rope, taking care the while we should not be visible from below, then cried, joyfully, "Safe, mademoiselle, so far, and now, if you do not mind taking my hand, we will run as fast as we can while daylight lasts. The captain is the devil himself, I think; he is sure to find the way we have gone; all we can do is to get a good start of him."

The demoiselle put her hand in mine without a word, and we raced along, like a couple of children, until we reached the pine wood. Here all went well for a time. I walked first, and, she following in my footsteps, we got over the ground quickly. Track, of course, there was none; but I had been over the ground so often—I was full of confidence—I had no doubt about finding the way. Alas! I had not allowed for the darkness; for now amongst the pine trees it was black as night. The slight familiar waymarks, a broken bough, a stunted bush, a fallen tree—by which, unwitting, I had been wont to guide my steps—were all obliterated.

When the idea first dawned upon me that we were lost, I scouted it as impossible, for I felt sure

the edge of the forest must be near. But we still went on and on, until the demoiselle, I knew, was ready to drop with fatigue. At times we had to grope our way with our hands, where the trees clustered so thick we could scarce avoid running against them. Then would come a more open space, which was worse, for we had to tear a path through the brambles. When it came to this I knew for certain we were hopelessly out of the way; there was nothing for it but to wait until the moon rose. I was afraid to tell my companion at first, lest she should accuse me of deceiving her; but, much to my relief, she took the news quietly.

"I have thought it was so for some time," she said, "only I waited for you to speak first."

"I have been through the wood a hundred times; by daylight I know every inch of it," I answered, "I pray you, noble lady, do not doubt me."

"Nay, it is my own fault, I should have trusted you before. Yet, oh, Heavens! out of that horde of ruffians, how was I to know? Tell me the truth, do you think they will overtake us?"

"I think not indeed; yet, as I have said, to the captain everything is possible. Still, if they did come this way they would come with a noise and with torches; in the darkness we may be able to elude them."

"And I have still the knife," she muttered under her breath, "I am not defenceless as I was." Then louder, "What do you propose to do?"

"Remain where we are until the moon rises. Once there is a ray of light I have little fear, though I would have sworn I knew the path blindfolded.

Will it please you to sit beneath this tree and rest awhile; we have far to go when we set out again."

The demoiselle sank to the earth almost as I spoke, and by that I knew how much she was wearied. I remained standing close by. I would have moved to a little distance, but the darkness was so black I was afraid to stir a step lest I should lose her. She sat very still, not a word passed between us; there was no sound save the murmur of a torrent in the distance, and the moaning of the wind among the trees. After a time, a long time it seemed, I could tell by the difference of her breathing that the poor young lady had fallen asleep. Worn out and exhausted, for a short time she forgot her troubles. I was most careful not to disturb her, but I kept a keen watch, and every now and then I lay down with my ear to the ground that I might hear if footsteps were approaching. It was a sure way I had learned from Jacques Tapin; you could detect the faintest footfall long before it drew near.

The hours passed and nothing came, and at last the moon slowly rose, silvering the tree tops with brightness. With the coming of the first gleam I found out, to my dismay, we had been wandering in a circle. We had pushed our way round until we were quite close to the entrance to the ravine, near the very spot we had started from. I almost fancied I could hear the echo of voices from the plateau.

The demoiselle still slept on, and as I bent over her, she was so motionless, for the moment I thought her dead. Then suddenly a happy smile parted her lips; she was in the midst of a pleasant

dream. It seemed a pity to wake her, yet I dared not delay, and called twice, "Mademoiselle, noble lady, it is time for us to go." She did not stir, but still slumbered on, so, moving to a little distance, I picked up a fir cone, and threw it upon her hand. She awoke then with a start, looked for a moment bewildered; then her peaceful dreams faded away, everything came back to her. "Mademoiselle de Suresne, the moon has risen, it is time we were on our way," I said respectfully.

"And I have been asleep, asleep?" she murmured, as if she could hardly believe it.

"Ay, lady, you have slept well, Heaven be praised. Naught has come near to disturb us; it will give you strength to continue on the way. I know the road now, and if it so please you we will set off."

I made no more mistakes, and in due time we passed out of the wood and I shaped my road for the deserted cottage. Fortunately, I had brought the rope away with me, coiled over my shoulder, else I should scarce have got Mademoiselle down the cliff. But even when past that difficulty the path was very hard for a woman. She bore up bravely, and I helped her as much as I could, but her little shoes were soon worn away by the rough rocks, her feet were cut and bleeding. She made no complaint. I only discovered by accident that with every step she left traces of blood behind her.

By the time we reached the ruined cottage, the moon had disappeared, the night had grown dark again. I had never been any farther; it was impossible to go on; it was necessary to halt until

morning. I explained this to my companion, telling her at the same time she would find a refuge within the hut whilst I watched outside.

"Not so, it is your turn to rest now," she said, her real kindness of heart showing itself for a moment. Could she have forgotten that unlucky ceremony, could she have put from her mind the enforced relationship in which we stood to each other, we might have travelled together as real friends—she would have trusted me without a word. "Rest you," she said, "there is no more sleep for me to-night, I will stand and watch."

I assured her that could not be, that we were liable to be surprised even yet, and at last she consented to go within. I would have made a little fire, for the wind was chill and she had no cloak, but feared a glimmer of light might, perhaps, betray us. I had hoped that, in spite of the lady's words, fatigue might have made her slumber again. Unhappily, it was not so. Through all that was left of that night, as I passed to and fro trying to keep myself warm, I could hear her low sobs as she wept the sad hours away.

With the first faint streaks of daylight the demoiselle opened the door, looking so pale and wan that Widow Desfougères would never have recognised her beautiful young lady. She was in sad plight. Her gown was hanging in tatters, one shoe was gone altogether, and her long dark hair, escaped from its fastenings, fell down her back even to her waist. Yet never to me had she appeared so beautiful. The knowledge that she was under my charge, that I, churl as I was, had been able to be of use

to her in her hour of danger, that she depended upon me still, gave me a sense of responsibility, of dignity even, that I had never felt before. At any rate, she should not have cause to say I had failed her. From that hour, though I did not understand it at the time, my whole nature altered. I could never have joined the brigands now.

I was recalled from my dreams by the demoiselle asking anxiously, "Jean, is it not time we were on the way?"

"Presently, my lady, presently. The sun has hardly risen yet, I would fain have more light."

For on every side was a vast expanse of cloud and mist, the valleys were full of white fog, even the mountains were hid from view.

"Meantime," I went on, "there is a stream hard by, if mademoiselle would like to bathe her wounded foot, and if I had the knife for a moment——" She handed it to me without a word, and I cut a broad strip from my leather jerkin, "If my lady would deign to bind that around her feet for a time, she would be better able to travel." Then I took her to the brook, and there left her, whilst I went to survey the path.

The sun was rising now, and the mists beginning to disperse. The rosy tints touched the mountain peaks first, they spread over the heavens, and presently the whole east was aflame with light. But the valleys were still in shadow. I could not distinguish that distant village, whither I had resolved to make my way, neither could I find any mountain track. Some path there must have been at one time, or the hut could never have been built, but all traces

of it were obliterated. All we could do was to continue descending, and trust to Providence for the rest.

When I returned for my companion I found she had made her toilet, as only a woman can. Her torn robe was drawn together, her hair—though it still hung about her shoulders, reminding me of the child I had so often watched at Suresne—was tied back with a strip from her dress, her feet were neatly bandaged and protected with the leather I had given her. Altogether, I thought, a fellow-feeling making me wondrous sympathetic, she looked quite ready for her breakfast. Unluckily, I had nothing to give her, and there was no possibility just then of obtaining anything.

"It is nothing, Jean," she said, when I expressed something of my trouble. "What matters anything so long as I am able to keep on? I drank of the stream and it refreshed me, I want nothing more; I am quite ready to continue our journey."

The demoiselle was obliged to accept a good deal of help from me now; the way was so steep, the foothold so precarious, and more than once we had to pass along some narrow ledge where the depths below made her dizzy. Yet she never faltered, never wished to rest; on the contrary, it was she who urged me onwards. We had two or three hours of this, and, in spite of our best endeavours, had made but little way, when we were brought to a standstill by a precipice. For the demoiselle, at least, it appeared impassable. It was an almost perpendicular cliff, a fall of some fifty or sixty feet, broken only in one place by a narrow ledge on

which grew a stunted fir-tree. We had two alternatives—to attempt the perilous descent, or to try back for another way.

I was much disinclined to retrace my steps, we should certainly lose much time, and might not fare any better; yet how to get down was a puzzle. We were still hesitating when the question was decided for us. As I peered over trying to discover a foothold, a thin wreath of smoke floated up towards me. No dwelling was to be seen, no sign of man, yet still that white smoke came curling upwards. I pointed it out to the demoiselle.

"There are people down there, they have a fire. See!" and leaning over I shouted until I was hoarse.

No one appeared, and yet, after a fashion, I was answered; I heard the loud barking of a shepherd's dog.

"Courage, my lady," I cried, "there is no going back now. Someone is down there; canst not hear the dog? And see how the smoke comes thicker and thicker through the cleft; be sure there is a hut underneath. Yet 'tis odd they do not hear. If I could but get you to yonder ledge I think we should find footing afterwards. Stay, I have it. Wait you here while I go down and seek assistance. It will be quite safe," seeing she looked around with apprehension. "If we had been followed we should have seen them before now; I would not leave you if I feared danger."

The demoiselle nodded permission; she was almost too weary to speak, yet she watched me anxiously as I went down, using both hands and feet,

and clinging fast to every slight projection. Once when a stone gave way under my foot, and rattled noisily to the bottom, I even heard her utter a faint cry. But I clung tight with my hands, and soon found another crevice. Yet, at that very moment, it flashed across me, once the demoiselle was safe, what a relief it would be to her to hear I had come to some untimely end. It would set her free at once, save her from all trouble and embarrassment in time to come. However, that had nothing to do with the business in hand, and now that she had escaped the brigands I did not mean to die a moment before I could help it.

When I reached the ledge I swung my cap in the air to show I was safe so far, then plunging down the cliff again soon reached the bottom. It was plain enough now why nothing could be seen from above. The upper half of the rock shelved outwards. From the open space where I now stood I could not see the summit, could see nothing of the demoiselle. Neither could I step farther back without descending again. The little valley was bordered by a deep ravine, traversed, I was thankful to see, from end to end by a mule track.

In my descent I had gone far from the smoke. I retraced my steps now, and, rounding a corner, came upon a little hut and inclosure, precisely similar to the one we had left above. Only this was not deserted. Sheep were in the fold, and dotted about the sides of the ravine; and an old man was bending over a fire in a sheltered nook, stirring something in a pot. Directly I appeared upon the scene a huge dog rushed forward, and attacked me

furiously. I kept him off as well as I could, but I had not even a stick, and, in answer to my repeated shouts, the man never once turned his head. A well-directed kick freed me at last, the animal retreated, and I, following, presently stood by the shepherd's side.

CHAPTER XI.

SECOND STAGE—THE SHEPHERD.

THE old man looked up with a start, nearly overthrowing his pipkin of ewe milk.

"Why did you not answer when I called?" I cried angrily.

He made no reply, but dipping a little bowl into the warm milk gave me to drink. I swallowed it eagerly enough, then telling him we had lost our way, and that my mistress was waiting on the cliff above, I begged his help to get her down. That was the explanation I had decided upon if anyone questioned me. I was the lady's servant, and crossing the mountains we had lost our way. The shepherd looked at me for a moment as if in doubt; then, hurrying into his hut, came out with a small piece of black bread.

"'Tis all I have to spare, my good lad, times are bad, and I have no wife to work for me. My good dame—Heaven rest her soul—has slept in the churchyard since three months were agone."

He took me for a beggar, that was certain; yet how was it he paid no attention to what I said? I was growing impatient. The demoiselle would be weary of waiting. I attempted again to tell him

what I wanted, and then the truth came out. The old fellow put his hand to his ear and shook his head. He was stone deaf and could hear nothing. I tried him with shouting, but it was no use, then I took to signs.

With a great deal of difficulty I succeeded at last in making him understand I had left someone above; then he told me there was an easier road. It was some distance round; he would come and show me.

The shepherd continued talking as we went, half to himself, half to me; sometimes shouting loud enough to be heard half across the ravine, sometimes muttering so low not a word could be distinguished. The poor old fellow could not hear his own voice. He spoke of many things, but always came back to the same—never had he known one to cross the mountains by this side. He himself had once built a hut up there, the grass in summer was sweet for the sheep; but that was many long years ago, he was too stiff to climb so high now. And his wife—Heaven rest her—liked better to dwell near the pass, sometimes, aye sometimes even twice in the week, there would be a traveller. But this side, no never, never from this side had anyone come before. Thus he rambled on while I gave little heed, save to nod my head here and there where he seemed to expect it. I was looking out to catch the first glimpse of my companion. It was a far round, the old man walked slowly, and I was sure my long absence would make her uneasy.

When at last we came in sight, the demoiselle

was perilously near the edge of the cliff, leaning over to see what had become of me. I was afraid to call out lest she should start and fall, and waited almost with trembling until she drew back again. We were above her now, our route had taken us so far out of the way, and, presently signing to the old man to stop, I ran forward and dropped down by her side.

"Safe, mademoiselle!" I cried, "and an easy road, and a friend, though 'tis but a poor shepherd who cannot hear. Come this way, and you shall have both rest and refreshment." And taking her hand I helped her up and led her to where the old man was waiting for us.

With all my pantomime I had been unable to convey to the old fellow's mind that my companion was a woman, and his astonishment was unbounded. But the stupid man could not, or would not, see that she was a noble lady. He looked hard at us both, then muttered to himself: "Not brother and sister? Oh no, different blood plainly. Man and wife? Not that either, she is carrying no burden, and, besides, he holds her hand. Sweethearts, of course, running away without going before the priest, I trow. Eh, lad, but you have brought her by a rough road." And, pointing to the poor girl's tattered dress, and wounded feet, he chuckled and tittered until I could have choked him.

The demoiselle flushed scarlet, then her face went pale as the snow as she turned haughtily away. Not before, though, I could see that her eyes were full of tears.

"Mademoiselle, heed him not!" I cried hastily.

"He is half-witted, I believe, as well as deaf. But he can be of use to us now, and soon you will be with your friends."

She answered nothing, but thrusting aside my proffered hand, followed us alone, and in silence.

The old man meant kindly, however. Directly we reached his dwelling, he set before her warm milk and rye bread, and a pièce of sour cheese. It was poor fare for her, but it was all he had, and he bestowed it upon her freely. When she had eaten something he took her within, fetched a great bowl of water to bathe her poor feet, and then came out and closed the door behind him. I had thrown myself upon the grass, for I, too, was weary; and presently he came and sat beside me. I paid no attention to him for a time; I was half asleep, and he rambled on at his pleasure. Then something in his words at last aroused me, and I set myself to listen. He did not know he was speaking aloud; he was arguing some matter with himself.

"'Twould be a charity, that is true," were the first words I caught properly, "a good deed to tell Father Vaudin next time I go down to chapel. They are poor enough, that is plain, poorer even than I am, since she has not a cloak to cover her. Yet they are young, while I am old, and it is good, very good still, it would keep my old limbs warm when the winds blow. No, I cannot part with it," and he was silent for a space. I looked towards the hut; all was quiet there, the demoiselle was resting.

Then the old fellow broke out again. "All the same though it troubles me. The girl is pretty, she is gentle, too; she has a manner with her like

the great lady who spoke with my dame long ago. The boy must be a sad rascal. I was wrong to laugh at him just now. If he were but an honest lad——" And he turned and looked at me, his simple face all puckered up with perplexity. It was evidently some very weighty matter that troubled him.

I yawned, and pretended to awake. He pointed to the village in the distance.

"You are going down to Dunstano?"

I nodded.

"It is a long way, though it looks so near. Has your sweetheart lost her cloak on the road?"

I made signs as if it had gone over the cliff. He seemed to set such value upon a cloak I thought it might be as well.

"Ah! it is a rough road you have brought her, and she is young and tender. I do not understand; but I fear you are a bad young man; it is a sin to take so young a girl from her parents. If she were your wife now——"

I caught his arm, and nodded vigorously; it seemed the only thing I could do to gain his favour. And I very much wanted to stand right with the old fellow. I had discovered an aged mule in a stable behind, and I wanted to borrow it for the demoiselle.

"She is your wife? You have been married to her before the priest?"

I nodded again, and then glanced somewhat apprehensively towards the hut, for the old man spoke loudly. Mademoiselle was standing in the doorway. She gave me one look, then went back and

closed the door. Only a look, but it was enough. All was lost that I had gained so hardly, her short-lived confidence was at an end.

The old shepherd had seen her also, and calling out hastily, "Yes, I will, I will!" he jumped to his feet and hobbled off, whilst I sat dumfounded, lamenting the hour I had cast eyes upon him.

And all too soon I found that I had not even the excuse of necessity. I had that about me which would have bought the shepherd's whole possessions. Chancing to put my hand into my pouch—not for anything I expected to find there, but simply mechanically in my dismay—I fingered what felt to me like pieces of money. I drew them forth in surprise, scarce ever in my life had I possessed a sou, and here were four gold crowns. It was a mystery at first, then presently I guessed the truth. The handful of gold the captain had given me for the priest! I thought I had placed all on the book when they bade me, but these four pieces must have slipped through my fingers. They were very acceptable now, it is true; still, if I had but discovered them before how much they would have spared me.

It was with a very crestfallen air that I arose, meaning to go and bargain with the shepherd for his mule. I had not taken two steps when the old man came back, followed by the demoiselle. He carried in his arms an old grey weather-beaten cloak of coarse cloth, just such a one as Widow Desfougères used to wear when she worked in the fields. This he displayed to me with an air of triumph, at the same time smoothing its folds with something of regret.

"Ah! you may well look," he exclaimed. "It belonged to my wife, and her mother before her. Heaven rest their poor souls! It is a cloak worthy to be given as a maiden's dowry, and yet I bestow it upon you. I give it because your good wife needs it sadly. She will have a bad name if she goes thus among the folk below, and she is too pretty to be spoke ill of. She does not wish to accept it, that is but right; it is a great gift, I know, but I give it to you partly for my soul's sake—it will bring me credit above—and partly for your good dame's bright eyes." And he stood looking from one to the other of us expecting us to go into raptures.

Fortunately, he thought it was the greatness of the gift that caused our embarrassment. After an awkward pause I said timidly:

"If mademoiselle would but deign, she might find it useful. He is foolish, but he means well, he knows no better."

"He knows just what you have told him," she returned scornfully.

I spread out my hands with a deprecating gesture. "It was a mistake. I did it for the best—yet I cannot explain. Trust me yet a little longer; believe me, I was not to blame. And mademoiselle need not mind accepting the cloak. I can pay for it; I have money I did not know of until just now. There is a mule in the stable, and I will buy that also, so we can reach the valley in a few hours."

"Bid the shepherd saddle the mule, then, and he shall go down with me; I have no farther need of you. Come afterwards to my brother, the mar-

quis, and he will pay you for what you have done. You shall have more gold than you can count, but we need no longer travel together."

I was perfectly willing to stay behind. The demoiselle had good reason to be angry now, and I guessed she would not spare me. But the old man, when I had, with difficulty, made him understand what we wanted, would not hear of it. He would not leave his sheep, not even for money. He had come up into the mountains in the spring, and there he meant to stay until the snows of winter, when he and his flock would go down together. And what did we want him for? Good lack! if we had quarrelled, we had better make it up again. Nanette, the mule, we could have and willing. It belonged to his wife—Heaven rest her—he had no further use for it; it was eating its head off. As for the cloak, he had already given it, a good deed to be set down to his account; but if, as it seemed, we had money, we might e'en give him what we chose. Yes, a gold piece would be more than enough for all blessings on us for a noble pair, adding, under the impression that he was speaking to himself, "I only hope it is honestly come by; good lack, I have my doubts, I cannot make them out at all."

Thus, much against her will, the demoiselle was compelled to put up with my company for a little longer.

CHAPTER XII.

LAST STAGE—THE CAVALIER.

We set out on our way soon afterwards, Mademoiselle de Suresne, wrapped in the old cloak, with the hood drawn well over her head, so that her face was almost hidden, riding on the mule, whilst I walked beside, leading it. The track was very plain, and though at times steep and rocky, Nanette proved to be very sure-footed, and we journeyed without difficulty. Not a word passed between us for a long time. I dared not turn my head. After what she had heard I was ashamed to meet the lady's eyes; yet, more than once, I fancied she was quietly weeping.

As we approached nearer to Dunstano, people began to pass now and then on the way. Happily they gave no heed to us. A ragged peasant, a countrywoman riding on a mule, were common enough. There was nothing in our appearance now to excite remark. Still, it was necessary to learn something of the demoiselle's wishes before passing through the gates, for I knew nothing of the town, knew nothing of where to take her. Something of this at last I faltered forth, standing bareheaded at her knee.

"Take me to the governor of the town. My name and rank will do the rest. As for you, make what tale you will. I have no doubt the governor will be able to protect me."

"Mademoiselle, you wrong me, you do, indeed," and, for the first time since we quitted the shepherd's hut, I looked her in the face. "You seem to fancy I make some claim upon you. I have no such idea; such a thought never entered my mind. I give you my word I will never speak of what passed in the camp yonder. It is to me as if it had never been."

"If I remember right you said something of the same before, then boasted of it to the first man you met. For a horse-boy you have a fair stock of fine words, but you cannot take me in any longer. What you have done shall be paid for."

"I want no pay," I interrupted. "I will not take from you a single crown. And I had no thought of boasting when I spoke as I did up yonder. I meant to call myself your servant, as I should do now if anyone questioned me; but I could not make the old man understand. It was easier to let him have his own way; I thought to gain his good-will by it. You do not believe?" as she looked at me incredulously. "It matters not. What have you to do with me at all? You are a great lady, I a nameless horse-boy. In a few minutes I shall pass out of your existence."

"Heaven only grant that you may; there is nothing better that I can ask for. Now to yon town, sir, with what speed you may. It is truly a pain to me until I am freed from your presence."

Unfortunately, the demoiselle was not to have done with me even yet.

We passed through the gates without question, though a smart young gentleman, in a blue riding suit, laced with silver, who was standing talking to an officer of the guard, looked at us rather curiously. I did not like his impertinent stare. So, instead of inquiring at the gates for the governor's house as I had intended, I went straight on, and presently questioned a passer-by. This took me out of my way, I suppose, for when, after crossing the market place, I turned down a narrow street as directed, I saw this same gentleman walking slowly in front. He turned round as he heard us approaching, then, signing me to stop, laid his hand familiarly upon the demoiselle's arm. She looked up in astonishment, and, her hood falling back, revealed her face.

"Ah, I knew those bright eyes had not deceived me!" he cried. "My pretty one, 'tis a sin to hide such a face; you should leave thick hoods for the old and ugly."

I did not interfere. Why should I? I might not be thanked. It was one of the lady's own kind. I supposed she would know how to deal with him. What she did was to draw herself up and motion him away indignantly.

"Monsieur, you mistake, I am not what you take me for. Jean, lead on, why are you stopping?"

I obeyed without a word, but the young gentleman walked on by her side.

"For what should I take you, my charmer, save

for the prettiest little girl I have seen in Dunstano? Tell me where you dwell, sweetheart, and I will come and see you."

I looked full of rage at his cool insolence; yet would I not stir a step until the demoiselle gave the word. And she was proud, too; resolved not to ask my help, though growing more and more distressed at the fellow's importunities. For he still kept talking, and would not leave us; and he had it all to himself, the street was so quiet and deserted. Save a few ragged children, who followed the fine gentleman to beg for alms, not a soul could be seen from end to end. At last, though still she would not speak, I caught an appealing glance impossible to resist, and, halting the mule, approached her side, saying respectfully, "My lady, I fear the gentleman is troubling you."

"He is more than troubling, he is insulting. Monsieur, once more I beg of you to leave me."

"You hear what the lady says, sir?" I repeated. "Will it please you to go away?"

"Lady, forsooth!" and he laughed jeeringly. "Since when have the peasant girls of these parts become ladies? A fine lady, indeed," and he laughed again. "A lady with a ragged beggar boy for escort."

"Beggar boy or not, I will do my best to protect her. As you see, your attentions are unwelcome, monsieur. Will it please you to let us pass in peace? My mistress is a lady, truly, though she has but a beggar boy for servant."

"Tell that to your fellows, boy, it will not go down with me. But I care not to bandy words

with a churl. Since the lady—your mistress, if you will have it so—has the bad taste to prefer your company to mine, let her pay toll, and she shall pass. One kiss, my pretty one, and you shall go," and, leaping upon a flat stone, he would have saluted her cheek had I not sprung forward and pushed him back.

"Keep your distance, monsieur," I cried. "Even if you are a noble we do not belong to your lands; you have no right to interfere with us."

The suddenness of the assault almost threw him over; but, recovering himself quickly, he drew his sword, and struck at me with the flat part of it. The blow was given with good will, and might have stunned me, but I jumped on one side, and it fell upon Nanette. Instantly the animal flung out both legs, and, catching my gentleman upon the knee, he fell to the ground. Nor did he rise again in a hurry—he had fallen with some violence upon the stones. When, limping, scarce able to stand, he rose at length, holding fast to the wall to support himself whilst he pursued us with imprecations, the mule had nearly reached the end of the street, and I was running after her. It was an ignominious flight, truly, but what could I have done against a gentleman? I was very grateful to Nanette, I can assure you. She got us out of the scrape very cleverly, and, as soon as I had the chance, I rewarded her with a good feast.

"Jean, I am obliged to you," said the demoiselle presently, in a low voice, compelling herself, as it were, to be grateful against her will.

"Nay, 'tis Nanette you have to thank this time,"

I returned carelessly. "I should have cut a poor figure save for her."

And not another word passed between us until we reached the governor's house. I led the mule into a large courtyard, where many people were coming and going, and, after assisting the lady to dismount, I walked before her to the principal entrance, proclaiming aloud her name and quality.

"Way there, way there, for the noble demoiselle, Mademoiselle, sister to the Marquis of Suresne!" I cried loudly.

The people stared and gaped; some laughed, some looked as if they thought me mad; but all made way, not one of them venturing to interfere with me. I walked boldly on, ascending a flight of steps with a sentry on each side, until at last we reached the hall. Here a steward, or some superior sort of servant, came forward to interrogate me, and taking off my cap and bowing low I referred him to the noble lady, my mistress. What passed between them I know not, for I held a little aloof; but, presently, to the astonishment of all beholders, the steward bowed before my late companion almost to the ground; then ushered her with courtly ceremony up a staircase. I followed them with my eyes until some curtains fell behind her, and she was gone.

All I had to do now was to effect my own retreat quietly as I could, to escape without questioning. At first this was not so easy. Such an arrival, and in such strange fashion, was not likely to pass without comment. But, scarcely had several gathered round, each trying to be the first to get hold

of me, when there was a slight commotion. Some prisoners were brought in, escorted by the guard. Everyone was pushed aside. I managed to slip out; found the mule just where I had left it, and was out of the courtyard before I was even missed. We had entered from the right, I turned now to the left; the gates on the other side of the town soon came in sight, I passed through, whipped up poor Nanette, and was some miles from Dunstano before I stayed her.

By that time my poor old mule had had enough of it, and, halting for the night at a little wayside inn, I gave her a rubbing down such as I warrant me she was little used to, and afterwards a first-rate supper.

Next morning it was necessary to come to some determination respecting my future proceedings. The first thing was to take stock of my possessions. That was soon done. A mule, with saddle and bridle—the bridle, a piece of rope, the saddle all shreds and tatters, with its stuffing of hay protruding—and three gold pieces, one of which I must break into to pay my reckoning. Never having possessed any money before, I thought these would carry me anywhere. The world was all before me. I was free to go where I pleased. I had heard much talk of Paris in the brigands' camp; why not travel thither to seek my fortune? Many great lords dwelt in Paris, I had been told; why should I not take service under one of them? Or I might even make for Calais. With three gold pieces and a mule, what could I not do? If the old burgher had spoken true, I might find one to befriend me there.

On the whole, however, I rather inclined to Paris. The tales of the brigands made the city seem attractive to me. I was still hesitating, when I suddenly remembered the paper I bore in my breast, the marriage contract the captain had bidden me take care of. I had forgotten all about it, or I should have given it to the demoiselle. I drew the roll forth now, and looked at it curiously. The strange black characters told me nothing; yet I knew exactly where mademoiselle had written her name, and I saw my own clumsy sign close beside it.

This turned my thoughts into a new channel. Suppose I were, indeed, as the captain had said, the husband of Mademoiselle de Suresne? What a difference it ought to make to me. The knowledge that there was such a tie between the noble lady and myself—secret and unknown though it must ever be—aroused in me feelings of ambition that had hitherto lain dormant. I had something to strive for now, I had to make myself worthy even of the Demoiselle de Suresne. She would never know, but that mattered little; she had done her part, she had stirred in me the spirit of my race at last.

Of course, had I been the low-born peasant they supposed, such a resolve would have been impossible. No achievements, however great, could make a churl a gentleman. Happily, I was no peasant, but the son of an English knight; never for a moment did I doubt the story of Mère Tapin. I might never be able to prove my birth—Crispin Papillard had, unfortunately, convinced me of that, or noth-

ing would have kept me from Calais—but I was assured of it myself, and that should be enough for me.

After a great deal of reflection, which made my head ache sadly, I decided the first step on my way was to learn the arts of reading and writing. The demoiselle had written her name without trouble, so had the boy marquis; I also must learn how to do the same. In my ignorance, I did not know that to be an accomplished man-at-arms was of much more importance, that many a great noble could not read, or sign his name, any more than I could. I learned later that the noble marquis, whom I had seen come to such an untimely end, had, in his youth, been trained for the church, and he in turn had taught his children. All this I had to find out. I still kept, however, to my first idea, and resolved to bend my steps towards Paris. All students went to Paris; I would do my best to make one of them.

CHAPTER XIII.

FATHER FELIX.

I STARTED on my long journey gaily enough. Unfortunately my little stock of money came to an end before I was half way. When I had changed my last piece there was nothing for it, I thought sadly, but to part with my good old mule. The money I hoped to obtain for her might enable me to perform the rest of my journey on foot. I was sad, because I did not like parting with Nanette. We had grown accustomed to one another, we were like a pair of old friends; besides, I had never ceased to feel grateful for her timely kick. Still, needs must when necessity drives; I could not feed on grass by the wayside as she could.

I was rather proud of Nanette's good qualities, but when I offered her to the landlord of the inn where I had stayed the night, he laughed in my face.

"Buy her?" he cried, "why she is older than my grandame. I will take her for your reckoning if hast no money, but she will be dear to me at that. You knew my charges when you came in—so much for supper, so much for the straw you slept on, so much for the breakfast you have just eaten, and

your appetite is good, you know—you should not eat if you cannot pay."

"You are mistaken, master landlord," I returned indignantly. "If the mule is old she is strong, there is much work in her yet. She has carried me from the mountains without stumbling, besides using her heels to free me from an enemy on the way. I part with her to my sorrow, but she shall never go where she is despised. Here is your reckoning, master," and putting my hand to my pouch, as if I had plenty left still, I pulled out my last few sous. Fortunately, my reckoning came to but a very small sum; I had enough.

This put the landlord in a better humour, and, besides, the thought of a profitable bargain had just occurred to him; he had been too hasty.

"If you really desire to sell the animal," he said, "now that I see you are an honest fellow, I do not mind dealing. What might you want for her, young master?"

"Nothing from you," I retorted, seeing well what manner of man he was, that he was not likely to give me anything worth having.

"Nay, why take offence?" he persisted. "You want to sell, I am willing to buy, why should we not make a bargain? Come, now, I will give you——" He hesitated, then named a sum so absurdly small I will not even trouble to set it down.

It was my turn to laugh in his face, and I did not miss the opportunity.

"'Tis a merry jest, good master landlord!" I cried, and, without taking further notice, jumped on Nanette's back and rode leisurely out of the yard.

"Go, and bad luck go with you, rascal," he called after me; "I doubt if the mule be not stolen. Begone, with what speed you may, lest I send the watch after you."

For all answer I turned round and laughed at him, until he went in and banged the door, so that the casements rattled again.

The inn was an insignificant place by the wayside, used only by the meaner sort of travellers; but it had a fair-sized orchard running along by the high road, and, as I reached the farther end, I heard a voice calling softly through the hedge, "Stop, young master, stop."

It was the stout-armed serving wench who had waited upon me with my breakfast. I had spoken her kindly because her eyes were red; her mistress had been rating her, and I had nothing to bestow but civil words.

"Young master," she said again, and, as she spoke, she looked around every moment to see she was not observed, "if you really want to sell your mule, take her to Monsieur the curé."

"Do you think it would be any use, Perette? She really is old, you know, and not good for very much."

"If she is quiet and does not stumble, Father Felix will not mind aught else. He is a great scholar, he reads books, reads always, even when he rides; to have no trouble with his beast is all he asks. And he is a good man, he will not cheat you. He, there"—and she crooked her thumb over her shoulder—"he would have taken her at once to Father Felix."

"Oh, that was the secret of his disappointment, then. You are a good girl, Perette, and if I do sell her I will not forget you; at present my pouch is empty. Where does Monsieur the curé live?"

"In Cléville, the village yonder, straight on and you will come to it; anyone will show you his dwelling."

"One moment, Perette," as she was about to run away, a new idea occurring to me, "you say Monsieur the curé is a great scholar, what do you know about it, how can you tell?"

"I only know what everyone knows; all people say that he is. He has more big books than Dame Cissi, his housekeeper, can count, and he has many little ones besides which he carries in his pocket. He is more learned, they say, than monseigneur the bishop; never was there a curé like Father Felix. I dare not stay longer, I shall be beat," and she made off, dodging in and out among the trees so as to reach the house from a different direction.

I rode slowly on, meditating upon what Perette had told me. If this country curé were as learned as she said, why not apply to him for what I wanted? Paris was a long way off yet, and many things might happen before I reached it; why not seize this opportunity if I could? I should lose nothing anyway, and surely it was worth the trying.

Once in the village the first passer-by pointed out the house, and I soon stood in the presence of Father Felix. He was a kindly-looking old man, tall, but with stooping shoulders, and a fringe of thin white hair. He had an absent manner withal, and his eyes had so dreamy a gaze that at times he

seemed half asleep. Yet, when he chose, he could see far enough, as I soon had the opportunity of ascertaining. I was enumerating the good qualities of my mule—amongst other things, I said she was so quiet that his reverence might, if he chose, read his missal as he rode along—when, chancing to look up, I caught the father's eyes fixed upon me, full of quiet amusement.

"Ah, I see," he returned blandly. "As you say you can answer for all this, my son, I suppose I am to understand you are studiously inclined yourself, that you have been in the habit of beguiling your journey by reading. Eh, is it not so?"

I hesitated, stammered, then blurted out the truth.

"Your reverence, I cannot read a line, but they told me you were in the habit of carrying a book, and I want you very much to buy the mule."

"That is better, that has the ring of truth."

"But, indeed, she is steady," I interrupted. "Often when the sun was hot I have ridden her nearly asleep, and she has never even jolted me."

"That also may be true, my son, I say not the contrary. And I like her looks, she reminds me somewhat of the faithful beast I have lost. What may be your price for her?"

Then I told him plainly what was in my mind. I would let him have the mule for nothing, I would be his servant and work for him faithfully, if, in return, he would give me food and shelter, and teach me the art of reading and writing.

"Reading and writing? And for what?"—the father's look was keen enough now. "Do you wish

to be a clerk, a priest—would you enter the service of Holy Church?"

"Not so"—I was quick to undeceive him about that. It was a whim, a fancy. I had long wished to understand the strange characters I had sometimes seen, and, becoming unexpectedly possessed of the mule and a gold piece or two, I was on my way to Paris to find someone to teach me. But my money had given out, and hearing his reverence was a great scholar, I had ventured to apply to him.

"A great scholar? No, indeed, my son," and he shook his head. "A humble student rather, just beginning to learn. Nevertheless, I know enough to teach you reading and writing, and Cléville, methinks, is a safer place for a young man than Paris. It is a strange fancy for one in your position; yet the idea is laudable and worthy to be encouraged. But I cannot decide at once. The mule may not suit me; in spite of your confidence, she may not be so fond of learning as you imagine," and the good old man smiled upon me kindly; though I knew it was not the mule he was thinking of but myself. "You shall stay with me for a week. I will ride your mule, you shall begin your studies; at the end of that time we shall know one another better."

And that was how I obtained my footing in the household of Father Felix.

At the end of the week, to the day, almost to the very hour, the curé sent for me to his study.

"My son, I am content with you," he began. "With you and the mule both, and if you like to

remain in my service I will teach you as much as you wish to know. I do not think you have told me all, mind"—I had spoken of Widow Desfougères, of the hard master I had run away from, of the shepherd who had bestowed upon me the mule, but never a word as to Mère Tapin, nor of my stay in the brigands' camp—"but I have some knowledge of men as well as of books, and I am willing to give you a trial. Touching the price of your good animal, for truly she is good, a patient quiet beast who hath learnt to know my ways already?"

"I ask no price," I interrupted hastily. "If your reverence will bestow upon me a short space of your time I am repaid a hundredfold."

"Not so, my son, you are strong and able, and have already won my good housekeeper's heart by your work in the garden. Never hath she had, she saith, a lad so good-tempered and willing. Of course, it may not last," and he looked at me slyly.

"It shall last your service," I interrupted again.

"Well, well, we shall see. To go back to the mule—I was about to say, that, instead of money, I will procure for you two suits of clothes, one for Sundays and *fête* days, one for your work. Those you have on, besides being somewhat the worse for wear, are scarce suited for your new position."

And, indeed, I was garbed somewhat poorly. I had a stout leathern jerkin, that is true; but the piece was lacking I had cut out for the demoiselle's feet, and as to my nether garments, the less said about them the better.

Behold me now, new clad from top to toe, in

doublet and hose of sober colours, as became a priests' serving-man, doing my utmost to please my new master. At first my progress was but slow. I had no idea that to learn reading and writing was such a terrible undertaking; often was I tempted to give up in despair. But my teacher would not allow that; once I had begun he kept me to it, until at last the first difficulties were mastered. After that life was easier. I still had to work hard, but I was able to take some interest in it. When I got so far, as a reward for my diligence, Father Felix lent me some books containing the adventures of one Amadis, a most noble knight and prince of chivalry. When I read how his lady often flouted him, I thought of the demoiselle; when I found he was constant ever, I made up my mind I would be the same. Another book with the lives of the holy saints, I am sorry to say, I did not care for quite so much, though truly their deeds were most marvellous. I liked best to read about knights, because I thought of my father, even dreamed sometimes I might perchance become a knight myself. Yet, for all that, he was so good to me, I never said a word of this to Father Felix. I had no particular reason save that I did not care to speak to no purpose, and I soon found out that the good curé, though he knew everything in the world else, was ignorant of the English tongue. It was foolish of me, for the good father might have helped me much; yet I know not that I was worse off in the end.

CHAPTER XIV.

A TAVERN BRAWL.

I LEARNED a great deal more than mere reading and writing whilst I dwelt with Father Felix. When he saw how I applied myself he soon made me leave off my rough work, and kept me a good deal about his person. He would talk to me sometimes for the hour together, of brave deeds done in the past; it was not until I came to mix with the great world I found out how much Father Felix had taught me. Also, I lost a good deal of my clownish rudeness. Being so much with my good master, I caught, unconsciously, something of his manner, and his mode of speech. For Father Felix was not as other curés in the villages round, most of them little above the peasants and given often to wine. How such a man came to be in such a small village is hard to tell, unless his superiors found him too good and sent him there out of the way. And yet he was very happy. He loved his people, and loved his books, and wanted nothing better.

I stayed with the good father for nearly two years, then events happened which made it necessary for me to go. The seigneur of the village was a certain Count Vallis, who owned a château hard

by. He was an officer of the court, holding a post in the household of madame, the King's mother, and was very seldom at Cléville. Lately, however, having had the misfortune to lose his wife, he had come thither for a period of seclusion. With him came his son, Monsieur Philippe, a lad of fourteen.

With this young gentleman, after a humble fashion, I soon became acquainted. He was pleased to take what he called a fancy to me, and, as he had nothing to do, would stroll down every day and demand my company. He had scarce known me a week when he promised me fine rewards if I would quit Father Felix and serve him instead, and was quite offended when I refused. He was a boastful braggart youth, yet I have cause to be grateful to him, for he gave me my first lessons in sword-play. Fresh from his fencing school, he wanted someone to practise with, and, in default of better, taught me. He was not a very patient teacher, and never missed a chance of a blow; but I took to the sword a great deal more kindly than I did to learning, and made much more rapid progress.

At length there came a time when I knew as much as my teacher, and, being taller and stronger, the conditions were no longer equal. I was not sufficiently master of my weapon to do as I liked with it, and one day, when he was pressing me more than I cared for, I had the misfortune to slightly wound him. For we were fighting with sharp swords that day, much against my inclination; but Monsieur Philippe had brought them down on purpose, and of course I had to obey. Fortunately

it was a mere scratch, but the young gentleman was highly indignant, the more so I think as he had meant to hurt me.

It was a vexatious circumstance in every way, and I regretted it with all my heart. No one ever knew, we both took good care of that, or there would have been trouble. Monsieur Philippe would have fallen into disgrace for crossing weapons with a serving man; I should, perhaps, have had a beating. Even Father Felix would have looked sadly upon me, blamed himself, perhaps, for teaching me above my position.

After this little incident the young monsieur turned quite against me. He left off seeking my company, which I thought only natural; what I did not think so fair, was that he should circulate bad stories against me. He tried all he could to get me into trouble with Father Felix. For instance, I was used sometimes to go and talk with Perette —who, by the way, had a sturdy sweetheart of her own—and he took occasion of this to accuse me of light conduct. No one really believed him, but he was the seigneur's son, he must not be offended, and I was soon made very uncomfortable.

So one day I shut myself in my garret, and drawing forth some paper—my marriage contract —read it from end to end. There was much I could not understand, 'twas couched in such strange fashion, but I could read the writing easily. "Very good, Jean," I said to myself, "you have learnt something; all these months of labour have not been wasted. Now it is time to be moving on. Monsieur Philippe has done you a service, Jean,

without intending it; you might have stopped here too long. You must go to Calais now to learn something of John of Strathbourne. Noble knights are not forgotten like poor folk, when they die. Master Papillard ought to have known better. He meant well, I dare say, but I do not believe in him now."

Father Felix was very loth to part with me; yet as for some unknown reason, I had incurred the ill-will of the young monsieur, he acknowledged that it was best. For my own sake I must be gone before worse came of it. Accordingly, he gave me a letter to a large convent at Auxerre, where, he was sure, he said, they would employ me. I gave him all thanks as in duty bound, and promised I would not fail to use it in case of need; but first I meant to seek a friend in the English town of Calais. I had not forgotten the dying message Crispin Papillard had intrusted to me. I meant to go to Master Surbeck.

The good curé was very poor; the little money he had he gave mostly to his poor people; only now and again did he indulge himself in a book. Still he managed to find me a few gold pieces; then one morning, after early mass, with the old man's blessing still ringing in my ears, I very sorrowfully departed. I had learned to love Father Felix dearly, he had been a true friend to me; indeed, I owed him much. I was no longer the uncouth churl who had come to Cléville, no longer the brigands' horse-boy, rude in manner as in speech. In the plain dark garb the good father had provided there was about me something of the

young clerk, and, indeed, that was what people thought me.

I travelled on foot as suited my slender purse, and for the first half of my journey I had a companion. Father Felix placed me under the charge of a bare-footed friar who was returning to his convent. I hardly think he guessed, however, what a jovial fellow-traveller he gave me. The jolly friar beguiled the way with songs—not all of them holy psalms—and when we came to a village or town he walked into the best house as if it belonged to him, and everything it contained was at his service. The women would fly to bring water to wash his feet, to set out the choicest upon the table; only the men sometimes, I fancied, held back a little, and looked at him with eyes askance. And all was repaid by a "Benedicite, my children." All the time I journeyed with him I did not spend one piece.

I cannot stay now to set down all the merry adventures we had together, nor yet what befell me when I went on by myself. I passed through Paris on my way, and halted there for a day to see the fine buildings, and catch a glimpse of the King. Unluckily, I was disappointed in this, for King Francis was away, hunting in his forest of St. Germain. He did not often stay in Paris, the people told me; at which I did not wonder, when I smelt the foul ditch which ran beneath the windows of the Palais de Tournelles. I saw, however, the house of the Constable de Bourbon. I first noticed it because the gateway was painted a bright yellow, and when I looked through the grating, the courtyard was dry and bare where it had been sown with

salt. It was the house of a traitor, they said, therefore it had been painted and strewn with salt; such was the custom always.

As I wended my way through Picardy I was reminded much of the story Mère Tapin had told me. In every town I saw traces of the English. They were always ravaging Picardy, even now, just as it had been in my father's time. And it was on the borders of Picardy, scarce half-a-day's journey from the English pale, that I take up my tale again.

It was past noon, and I had been walking since dawn, when I arrived at a fair sized village. It was half in ruins, having been burnt a few years before, when the Duke of Suffolk desolated the country well nigh to Paris. It had been partly rebuilt since, and a great bush swinging high across the road showed me where was the village inn. I entered gladly, for I was much fatigued; and calling for a measure of thin wine to wash down my frugal repast, took some bread and cheese out of my wallet. I sat down on a bench in one corner out of the way of more important customers, and at first was too intent upon satisfying my hunger to give heed to what was going on. Thus it was that I do not know how it began, or what was the first cause of the trouble.

When the increasing hubbub at last drew my attention, I found there was a war of words going on between a gentleman seated alone on one side of the table, and another party of three, who were drinking their wine at a little distance. They were all young, not one of them I should say having reached thirty, but whilst the three friends were of

swarthy complexion, and rather slenderly formed, the one who sat alone, besides being stout and stalwart, had fair hair and blue eyes, and his ruddy beard shone like gold. His dress also was somewhat differently fashioned from the others, but it was quite as rich, and the jewel that fastened the plume in his cap flashed brighter than any of theirs. Two of the dark men wore short red cloaks, but their companion was in a suit of green, and his mantle was green likewise.

It was the three who made all the noise. They were talking loudly, and gesticulating with great vehemence, whilst the fair-haired knight merely looked up now and again with a slight smile that seemed to exasperate them. I soon saw that although they were three to one, they were talking at the knight, not to him, as if they wished to provoke him to begin the fray. But he still took no notice, until at last, by accident or design, one of them filled his glass so clumsily that the wine splashed upon the table, and some drops reached the fair cavalier. Instantly he was upon his feet; yet he spoke quietly enough—

"That was rather awkwardly done, monsieur. Am I to take it as an accident? If so, I wait for your apology."

I think his quiet manner deceived them, for he who had spilt the wine, returned in a tone even more insolent than his words:

"You may take it just as you choose, monsieur," and his friends burst into a loud laugh.

"I will take it this way, then," returned the other equably. "I will return the compliment," and,

catching up his glass, he emptied it over his insulter.

Then arose a commotion, indeed. Swords flashed forth, and everyone crowded round to see the three knights fall upon one. The landlord alone disappeared. He rushed out into the street, calling loudly for the watch.

Though the contest was so unequal, the fair-haired monsieur had not a friend among them—a fact soon explained when I heard the shouts and cries.

"Pig of an Englishman! Down with the Englishman! Death to the English spy! What does he here?"

Though England and France were for the moment at peace, it was not likely an Englishman would find friends in Picardy. I jumped up on the bench to watch the fray, wishing with all my heart I had a sword to join in, that I could strike a blow for my countryman fighting against such odds. Yet he did not seem to need much assistance. The clash of swords was sharp and fierce, but with his back to the wall he kept them all at bay; he held his own gallantly. Then he in the green suit drew off a little; I thought, in my innocence, to give his adversary fairer play. I was very soon undeceived. Watching his opportunity, he suddenly sprang upon the table, and struck at the Englishman's unguarded head. It was a foul blow, and ill would have come of it, only, Our Lady be praised, I was quick as he. A three-legged stool stood close to my hand, and, catching it up, I hurled it with all my might. It caught my gentleman full in the face. His sword

flew into the air, and he fell senseless, blood gushing from his nose and mouth.

"Well thrown! well thrown!" cried the Englishman, who had become aware of his peril without being able to avert it. "By St. George, well thrown indeed! Master clerk, I rather fancy you have saved my life. Have at them! Down with the cowardly dogs!" And he shouted some words in English which sounded like a battle cry.

And, indeed, it was somewhat like a battle now. When he of the green cloak fell there arose a perfect howl of execration. Every man in the room pressed forward to take share in the fight; and sticks, broken benches, and empty bottles were hurled indiscriminately. The two cavaliers were out of it now. Some of the missiles fell upon their heads also, and they made haste to retreat.

"Forward! Charge! Scatter them!" cried the Englishman, making a rush, and using the flat of his sword vigorously, while I seconded him as well as I could with half of a broken bench. Unluckily, although they gave way in front, it was only to close in and attack us from behind. We were in more peril than ever, until presently I spied a small door in a corner near, and, pointing it out to the Englishman, we fought our way towards it. And truly it was time to beat a retreat. My head was cut from the glass of a broken bottle, my left arm was almost useless, whilst the blood was streaming down the Englishman's face, blinding him so that he could scarce see.

When we reached the door the knight made me go in first; then, clearing a space with the point of

his sword, followed me quickly and clapped it fast. There was a key inside, and a stout oaken bar as well, so that, beat as they might, for a little space we were at peace. The Englishman took advantage of this to bind up his wounded head, which he did very coolly, advising me to follow his example. Few words passed between us at first. Neither had much breath to spare, not to speak of the noise as they strove to break down the door, which almost drowned our voices.

Then suddenly there came a lull, followed by cries of "The watch! the watch!" then a hurried rush of retreating footsteps. The Englishman laughed:

"The curs run. It is time now to think of ourselves. You have friends here, my young clerk—someone to speak for you?"

"I am no clerk, monsieur, and a stranger besides. I but halted on my way to Calais."

"You have friends there?"

"I hope to find some; at present I know no one."

"You had best be off, then, for I have no power to help you here. They dare not hurt me; all the more will they fall upon you. I wish it was the other way about, by my word I do. I should have fared badly but for that well-timed blow of yours. I was a fool to come here alone, though I had my reasons. Yet what to do for you——"

"Pardon, monsieur," I interrupted. "I am no child; I am generally in the habit of helping myself. That fine gentleman I knocked over just now —I suppose he was a person of some consequence?"

"Not a doubt of it, though I have not the honour of his acquaintance."

"I had best keep clear of the watch, then. 'Tis easier to get into prison than out again."

"My young clerk, you speak like an oracle, only time is pressing and they are coming. Stay, though, I have it. You are my servant, I have a claim to protect you then."

"Nay, monsieur, that will not do. You arrived here on horseback, I doubt not, I came some time later on foot. Besides, I paid my own score, and ate my own bread and cheese; my fare, I assure you, was not that of monsieur's servants."

"Neither do you speak like a servant, my good friend; I cannot quite make you out. I can swear I never set eyes upon you before, yet there is something about you reminds me of one I held dear—a close kinsman who is no more. You must come to no hurt by me, or I should never forgive myself."

I did not pay much heed to his words, for, whilst he was speaking, I was looking about seeking some way of escape.

Our place of retreat was a sort of closet, long, narrow, and rather dark, lighted only by a small grating high up in the wall. One side was fitted with shelves from top to bottom. On the uppermost were tankards, and cups, and pewter trenchers, others were filled with cheeses and loaves of rye bread, and on the lowest, amongst other things, was a half-eaten roast capon flanked by a flask of red wine. The other side was lined with meal tubs, and barrels of salt meat; but behind these, out of sight in the darkest corner, I spied at last a small oaken

door. It was locked and bolted, top and bottom, but a key was hanging close beside, and I soon moved the barrels and had it open.

"See, monsieur," I exclaimed, "'tis the easiest thing in the world. I have but to walk out."

The door, I found, gave on to a short passage, open at one end to the street, at the other to the inn garden.

"This is my way," I said, pointing towards the garden. "While you are parleying with them here I will slip off and be on my road before they miss me. Unless, indeed, you will think better of it and come also."

"Not I. I am in no danger, and I have a crow to pluck with those fine gentlemen; they have not done with me yet. I will keep the watch in play, never fear; they drove me in here for their pleasure, I shall study my own before coming out again. Stay one moment, have you money?" and he put his hand to pouch.

"Plenty for my needs, monsieur," I answered quickly, for I did not want him to pay me; though, indeed, my last crown was drawing to an end.

"Good, but you may as well secure your supper," and, going to the shelf, he brought the flask and the capon, saying, as he thrust them into my wallet, "When they were teaching me the art of war the first thing I learned was always to look after the victualling. Now, be off before messieurs the watch break in the door. You know the way? Make for the forest; there is a plain track will take you to Guisnes. Once there you are safe, for it is English ground. Be sure you do not fail to come

to me at Calais; you and I must have some talk together. Now, gentlemen of the watch, I am ready for you," and, as I slipped away, I heard him demanding in loud tones who it was that thus dared to disturb him.

I reached the garden unperceived, as every creature belonging to the place was assisting at the disturbance in front. It was of some extent, terminating at the far end in a thicket of hazel-bushes, into which I plunged very willingly. After, came a broad ditch I had to wade, then cornfields, separated from the road by a fringe of poplars. I kept behind these as much as possible; running my hardest when no one was in sight, walking steadily when people passed. I made my way thus for some distance, until the fields gave place to waste land and bog. Then I came upon an outlying spur of some great forest, which took me back to the days of my childhood. It seemed home to me directly, I was lost amongst the trees, my grief was that it came to an end so soon.

That night I rested at Guisnes, doing full justice, by the way, to the Englishman's supper, and early next morning, joining myself to a company of peasants going to market, I passed with them through the gates of Calais. My long journey had come to an end; I had reached my destination.

CHAPTER XV.

AT THE SIGN OF THE DOG AND PORRIDGE POT.

I WAS in no hurry to go directly to Master Surbeck, for, the first time since I had started, I felt free to look about me. Save that one day in Paris, I had seen little of cities; thanks to Father Felix, I had always avoided them. "Bad for your purse, and you may fall in with bad company," he had said; "better walk a league round than go through a city." I had promised to follow his counsels. I had done so to the best of my power; now I could please myself. I wandered on, I knew not whither, every moment some new object attracting my admiration. Now it was some fine dwelling, covered with carvings, fresh from the mason's hand, and with arms and motto emblazoned over the gateway. Then my attention would be diverted by the passing of a band of men-at-arms. Their well-polished weapons and bright armour, their soldierly bearing and the strict order in which they marched, formed a great contrast to the roughness of my friends the brigands.

Once I had to jump aside to avoid being hustled into the gutter by half a dozen of these same men. They were off duty, and came swaggering along, thrusting aside all who stood in their way.

At any other time I might have resented their treatment, but I was too interested in listening to their English tongue. It seemed so strange to me that these were my countrymen; I would not have quarrelled with them for a bag of crowns. Instead, I pulled off my cap with a mock bow, and jumped aside laughing. When they saw I took their rudeness in good part, they laughed also, and spoke to me in English. I shook my head to show I did not understand, and they cried again in a barbarous jargon, half English, half French, which I made out to be, "Well done, you are a good fellow, come and drink with us," at the same time putting their hands to their mouths imitating the motions of drinking. I shook my head once more, said I must be off about my business, and with another laugh and wave of the hand got away.

As I turned the corner of the street, a knight in full armour, save for his helmet, rode slowly by on his way to the tilt-yard. Two esquires followed at a short distance, one bearing his master's head-piece on his saddle bow, the other carrying his pennon. I stood and watched until they passed out of sight, feasting my eyes on the knight's brave looks and gaily caparisoned steed. Something in his bearing reminded me of the Englishman I had left at the inn. "Ah, I will not fail to seek out my new friend," I thought to myself, "if he is a gallant knight like that one, he may be able to help me to some purpose. Should I fail to learn anything concerning my father, as Master Papillard predicted, the English knight shall be my leader; I will serve under his banner." Then, for the first time, it

crossed my mind that I knew not my friend's name. "Do not fail to come to me at Calais," he had said, and that was all. He had forgotten I was a stranger, and his dress was plain, he wore no device, and I knew not how to ask for him. Still it would not matter much, I felt sure; I had but to keep my eyes open, and I should see him riding through the streets.

By the time I had arrived at this conclusion it was close upon ten o'clock, and savoury smells from every inn proclaimed the dinner hour was at hand. In these degenerate days men have fallen into the habit of taking their meals later. My neighbour hard by, who brings us always the newest from court, never dines before noon, sometimes so late even as one. As for myself, I keep to the good old hour still,

> "To rise at six, to dine at ten,
> To sup at six, to bed at ten,
> Makes a man live to ten times ten."

Thus runs the old song, and so say I.

To go back to my first day in Calais, it was near ten; everything, including my own appetite, showed it was dinner-time, and my thoughts turned towards Master Surbeck and the message I was to deliver. I was to hear of him, you may remember, at the house with the sign of the Dog and Porridge Pot, hard by the convent of the Black Friars. To the convent of the Black Friars I asked my way now, the first passer-by putting me right. Once there I could see for myself, as, at a short distance from the convent-gate, there hung in mid-air a gilt dog, with its head in a three-legged pot, all bright and shin-

ing in the sun. The house looked as if it belonged to a substantial merchant; it was built of wood and plaster with many gables, and there was a long low warehouse running behind. A few bales of cloth displayed outside showed the trade that was carried on within.

The door of what looked like a dark counting-house was partially open, and no answer being returned to my modest knock, I went straight in. I could see no one there at first, but presently from behind some rolls of woollen there stepped forth a red-faced youth, clad in blue jerkin and white breeches, who asked me, not very civilly, what I wanted. I answered boldly enough—I was not going to be put down by an apprentice—that I wished to see one Master Surbeck.

"And what might your business be?" the boy persisted, eyeing me up and down very contemptuously. My appearance had suffered somewhat from the fray at the inn; I was not over and above presentable.

"That is my affair," I retorted. "Go you and tell your master a stranger is desirous of speaking with him."

"Strangers of your sort," my young gentleman returned with a sneer, "have always good noses; they are quick to smell the cooking-pots. Come again in two hours' time, and perchance——" Then in a thrice, his whole bearing altered, he became as meek and civil as before he had been insolent. "Certainly, worthy sir," he said respectfully, "and if you will but give me your name I will report it to my master."

The reason of the change was not far to seek. A man of middle age, in a dark gown bordered with fur, had entered the shop and putting down his cap as if he were at home, looked at us questioningly.

"'Tis one who seeks you, sir," said the apprentice. "I was telling him even now that your worship was abroad."

"Nay, you were telling me that I smelt the——" I began, then thinking it was not well to get the youth into trouble, especially as there had been a spice of truth in what he said, I turned it off with: "If you are one Master Surbeck, to be heard of at the sign of the Dog and Porridge Pot, I bring you a last message from Crispin Papillard of Gravenel."

"A last message? Is the good man dead then? I am Martin Surbeck, at your service; tell me quickly."

Then I recounted the circumstances of the good old burgher's death, and the message he had charged me with. The merchant was silent for a space, his face working as if my news grieved him sorely. He said at length: "Heaven have mercy upon his soul, may he rest in peace. He died as a brave man should. I will have a thousand masses said for his repose. They owe me for some cloth at the convent, they shall pay for it by their prayers. But you," and he cast at me a sudden suspicious glance, "how know you all this, what sign can you show that your tale be true?"

"The sign of the day of St. Michael," I answered quickly, as Master Papillard had told me, though I mentioned it not at the time. "For the sake of

what happened on that same day you are to believe my words and befriend me in my business."

"Ay, ay, it is true, then, for none knew of that day besides ourselves. As to your business, command me, I will look upon it as a debt I owe to Crispin Papillard."

"I would rather speak of it to you alone, sir," I said, glancing at the open-eared apprentice.

"Good, good, it shall be so. But 'tis ill talking on an empty stomach. You will honour me with your company at dinner, young sir. Bolt the door Amand, and come quickly. The hour is overpast already." And the merchant led the way into a room at the back, where, at a table spread with a fair white cloth, a portly dame and two or three children sat waiting. They all rose at our approach, and remained standing until we had taken our seats. Master Surbeck introduced me to his wife with, "Dame, here is one who brings us bad tidings of good Crispin Papillard, but 'twill keep till after dinner. Bring in the platters, knaves," and at once two or three serving-men quickly placed the smoking viands upon the table.

Everyone in the house sat down together, the servants and apprentices at the lower end; but I was given the place of honour at the right-hand of the host. There was very little talking during the meal. Master Surbeck asked me a question or two very briefly, to which I responded in the same fashion, seeing well he only spoke out of civility, and desired to eat his food in peace. When dinner was over the worthy merchant took me into his own room to listen to my story. I told him every-

thing, as Crispin Papillard had counselled me, saving only concerning the demoiselle. That was not my business at all; even if my lips had not been sealed by my promise, it had naught to do with the matter in hand.

"'Tis many years ago, much has happened since then," remarked the merchant when I had finished. "Yet would I not say with my good friend that it is impossible. Strathbourne, Strathbourne, I know not the name, yet have I large acquaintance with the English. Of one thing I am quite certain, there is no knight of Strathbourne in Calais now. Perhaps your father was what the English call a poor knight, a mere hanger-on, that is, in some great man's household. If so, it would be more difficult to trace him. But let me see this letter you speak of. I can read English easily as French. I had need, or little trade should I do, I trow."

I placed the torn, discoloured paper in his hands, saying, "It is old and worn, with much carrying, but I prize that dark stain more than anything in the world. It is my murdered father's life-blood."

"Fortune of war," he returned coolly. "I doubt not he shed much good French blood before he died, so that makes things even." And he read the letter first to himself, then aloud in French to me. It ran thus:

"My Lord: This by the hands of my servant, who will bring you where I am to be found. I am sore wounded, like I think to die, and would fain commend to your care my little John. If of your goodness you would come to me now, methinks I

could die in peace. I would say more, but my hurts make me uneasy. From the inn of the Golden Lion.

"Your Lordship's most humble servant,

"JOHN OF STRATHBOURNE."

That was all; no more. The superscription had perhaps been left for the morrow that never came.

"It is sorely vexing," said the merchant. "Just his friend's name and title would have settled the difficulty. Or had he put his seal, and we knew his arms, we could find him out directly. It is a pity you parted with the ring, for it might have helped us."

"I had little choice in the matter," and I remembered, with a start, how I had placed it upon the demoiselle's finger. "But it had no arms, it bore only a plain device—a badge of two letters within a heart. Master Papillard said it was naught and I had best sell it."

"Naught, certainly, since it is gone. 'Tis little use crying for wine when the butt is empty. I must do the best with what I have. It cannot be done in a day; it may be weeks, perhaps, or even months. What of yourself meanwhile?"

"I had thought, if I learned nothing of my father, to take service with the English," I returned to this. "Perchance it would be well to do so at once."

"Not just yet, young sir, if you please. For the present you must make your home with me. I should be wronging my good friend's memory did

I not help you. Remember, he commended you to my care."

This did not quite suit me. It was one thing to be beholden to a stranger for a dinner, quite another to quarter myself upon him altogether. I expressed my feelings best way I could, so as not to offend the worthy merchant, and I do not think he was displeased at my hesitation.

"If that is all," he said, "if it is only your English independence, perhaps it can be arranged. You say you can write, make a fair copy of your letter," and he placed pen and ink-horn before me.

It took me a little time. I was not very expert with the pen, and when I handed it over the good man made a wry face.

"It would scarce pass from my clerk," he said, "but 'tis to be read. 'Twill serve; yes, 'twill serve. Young sir, if you wish you can supply my need. I require some extracts made from my private book, and care not to give the task to my clerk lest it make him wise as his master. You can do me no harm even were you so inclined, for you will not understand one word. What say you, will you undertake the business? It will cost some time and trouble, but it will more than pay your diet?"

I consented gladly, provided my poor attainments were of any use to him, and was at once assigned a place in the merchant's household.

CHAPTER XVI.

MY LORD ABBOT.

BEHOLD me now transformed again from a curé's servant to a merchant's clerk. I cannot say the work was much to my liking, or that I did not get very tired of it. I was kept nose to desk every day from breakfast until dinner, and then again to supper at six. The evening hours I was expected to pass in the company of the merchant and his family. I had a shrewd suspicion Master Surbeck kept me so close more to prevent my getting into mischief than because he cared for my work. I had been forced to say somewhat of the tavern brawl to account for my wounded head. I rather fancy he feared I was inclined to be quarrelsome.

I submitted with good grace, however, to all the worthy merchant enjoined, knowing that he was at work on my behalf, and that scarce a day passed but he did something. All the steps he took I never knew, but one was to send a trusted old servant among the English troopers to discover, if he could, any who had served under John of Strathbourne. The fellow was a Fleming, who boasted he could drink cup for cup with any man; but night after night he would stagger home in such condi-

tion as proved plainly the English were too much for him. Worse still, he brought back no news; there were few men of old service left in Calais. The troops had died off like sheep in the last campaign, when they had marched almost to the gates of Paris. On their way back they had fallen a prey to pestilence, scarce a third of them returned, and even of this remnant few remained in Calais; they had been sent to the wars in Scotland, and their places filled up by new levies.

At last, one day, when I had been in the merchant's house for nearly a month, Master Surbeck came to me where I sat at work, with, "Monsieur Jean, I have some news for you."

"News of my father?" I cried eagerly. "You have found out something?"

"A little, not much; but enough, I think, to put us on the right road. I have ordered Hans back to his duties, and I trust to Heaven this drinking has not spoiled him."

"But what have you learned?" I asked impatiently; I did not want to hear about old Hans.

"As a great favour, I have been shown a roll of names of those who took part in the wars years ago, and, amongst them, low down near the end, as if of not much consideration, is the Knight of Strathbourne. That in itself would not be much to us. We knew the name already, but it proved to my friend there once was such a knight in Calais, a fact he had seemed inclined to doubt. He counselled me then to draw up a humble petition to the English Governor, inclosing a copy of your letter, and he would see that it reached my lord's hands.

I did so on the spot, whilst he stood over and helped me with the wording; by this time to-morrow my Lord Governor will have read it. So hold yourself in readiness, friend, a messenger may arrive for you at any time. Have the letter ready to hand, and wear the new suit that Amand has made for you."

But my lord the Governor was in no such hurry. For the first week I waited in eager expectation, thinking everyone who entered was a messenger sent to summon me. Then another week, my hopes falling lower every day, until I importuned Master Surbeck into seeking his friend again.

"'Tis ill hurrying those in office," he remarked sagely, "yet if you wait too long you are forgotten altogether. I will take you with me this time to plead your own cause, and a few gold crowns may get us to the Governor the sooner. Perhaps I did not grease my good friend's palm quite thickly enough; such fellows have no conscience."

I made ready in gladness of heart, but, just as we were about to set out, to my great disappointment, a lay brother from the convent of the Black Friars came to say Master Surbeck was to wait upon the Lord Abbot instantly.

"He will not keep me long," said my good friend to console me, as he hurried away. "'Tis about that last parcel of cloth, I dare swear, though 'tis strange the Lord Abbot himself should trouble. You may copy me these two pages whilst I am gone; there is nothing like work for making the time pass."

I was still at my task, though I went at it not

with the best grace in the world, when Master Surbeck returned in a state of most unusual excitement, crying out almost before he was in the room:

"Cap to head, Monsieur Jean, and come with me quickly. To think we have been searching the town through, and all the time it hath lain at our very doors."

"Is it about my business, then, they wanted you?" and I jumped to my feet, nearly upsetting the hated ink-horn.

"Truly it is, my friend; come, we must not keep them waiting. Amand, if any come for me I am waiting on the holy fathers at the convent." Then, as we turned into the street, "The Governor spoke of the matter to the Abbot last night, and this morning they send for me. There is a second one there, my Lord Abbot of St. Edmunds, one of the great houses in England, and 'tis he knows of your father. Mark him well, friend Jean, he has an eye can read you through; see that you speak only the truth. A word in your ear though; I said as little about the brigands as might be, I dwelt mainly upon Father Felix."

By this time we had reached the convent gate. The porter surveyed us through the grille, and we were admitted directly. I had never been inside the walls before, and was struck with astonishment at what I saw around me. The inclosure was so vast, the houses so many, it seemed like a little city in itself. There was the great monastery, a tall stately building, standing alone in the centre; there was the chapel, a goodly edifice, indeed, and

cloisters and schools, and many other erections I knew not the uses of.

It was familiar ground to Master Surbeck, however, and he made his way at once across a walk of soft sward to a side door of the monastery, where we found a monk awaiting us.

We were taken then, after passing through several passages, into an inner cloister, where many monks were engaged in various occupations. Not one of them looked up, neither was there the slightest murmur of voices; indeed, throughout the whole place there was stillness that might almost be felt. I trod softly as I could, yet my footsteps seemed to wake the echoes. The Abbot had his good monks well in hand, I trow, or else extra discipline was observed on account of the stranger. We stopped at length in a small, bare anteroom, where we waited, whilst our conductor went into a room beyond. He returned almost directly, made a sign that we were to enter, then closed the door softly behind us.

The room we were now in was of some size, the walls covered with pictured tapestry, the windows filled with stained glass, through which the flickering sunbeams cast strange hues upon the floor. But after my first glance round I took little heed of the surroundings, my whole attention was concentrated upon the two churchmen who sat side by side at the upper end. One was stout and comfortable looking, with well-filled cheeks and unwrinkled brows; little sign of fast or vigil was there about him. The other, whom I guessed at once to be my man, was tall and spare, with deep-set penetrating

grey eyes, and a sharp, decisive manner. The English abbot started visibly when he first caught sight of me, as I fell on my knees beside Master Surbeck; then, bending forward with a "By your leave, brother," he signed to me to come forward. He watched keenly as I advanced, and, even when I stood before him, gazed at me hard and long without speaking. What it might portend I knew not, but for a few moments his features worked strangely. When the mood passed, as if ashamed of his emotion, his manner grew sterner than ever, and he addressed me in a haughty tone of command, "Your name, sirrah?"

"Jean, son of John of Strathbourne."

"Halt, there! You go too fast, knave; that remains to be seen."

"'Tis writ so in the letter, holy father."

"Ah! the letter; you have brought it. Give it to me; I have seen as yet but a villainous copy."

I handed it to him without another word, and, after one quick glance at the writing, he turned his head aside, so that I could not see his face whilst he read. The other churchman took no part in the matter. He sat with an air of quiet indifference, his sleepy brown eyes full of a dreamy content, reminding me of an ox chewing the cud. When my Lord of St. Edmunds had finished reading the letter, and, for such a short epistle, it took him a wondrous long time, he turned to me again, saying sharply, "And now, boy, you would-be gentleman, for your story. Not a word false, mind, or I will have your tongue branded with hot irons."

"Craving your pardon, holy father," I answered

boldly, for, spite of his harsh words, there was a look in his eyes I thought meant me well, "if my father were noble born, and I his lawful son, I am a gentleman; there is no would-be in the matter at all. Whether it is so or no is for wiser heads than mine to find out. I but crave to know the truth."

"Ay, the truth, the truth; that is what we all want. Out with your story, my son, and have done with it."

My Lord Abbot listened intently to what I had to say concerning my father's death, and all that Mère Tapin had told me, exclaiming more than once, "Ay, it tallies, it tallies!" and cross-questioned me so closely that, had I been trying to deceive him, I had been caught at once. My later life he cared little about, and stopped me impatiently before I got to the brigands.

"Enough, enough!" he cried, "that may come later, at present our business is with John of Strathbourne. The letter has been long on the way, but it has reached the right hands at last. It was written to me before I became an unworthy servant of Holy Church. Strathbourne was my sworn friend, my companion at arms. If you are cheating me, boy, you will have reason to curse the hour you were born. The ring you speak of—the ring you say you lost—what arms did it bear?"

"No arms at all, holy father, simply two letters inclosed in a heart. I cannot even say what they were, for I lost it before I learned to read, and cannot recollect them. Mère Tapin took it from around the knight's neck; it was too small to go upon his

finger. A friend to whom I once showed it thought it might have been a woman's ring of betrothal."

"And he was right, if your tale be true—that is, it belonged to your mother. I have seen it often; I remember the bauble well. I shall know more about this matter shortly, I hope, and will send for you again. Meantime, he is best with you, Master Surbeck. I will be at his charges." And with that we were dismissed.

I went away with my hopes raised high. I felt sure fortune was smiling upon me at last. I thought even a little of the demoiselle. I doubted not but that her forced marriage had been dissolved long ago. Still, if all went well, some day I would seek her out. She should know that I was not the mean churl she had thought me—then the remembrance of the past need not shame her.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE END OF JACQUES TAPIN.

A WEEK elapsed before I was sent for to the convent again. Then I found my lord abbot with another companion, none other, indeed, than the knight of the inn. He seemed rather surprised to see me enter the room, but came forward at once, saying heartily:

"Well met, my good friend. I began to fear I had lost you. But how came you to seek me here? I have been looking for you at my lodging every day."

Then, without giving me time to answer, he turned to the abbot with:

"This is he of whom I spoke to you, my lord; he who struck such a good blow for me at the tavern."

"And it is he of whom I spoke to you," returned the churchman; "I sent for him but just now. Have done with your tavern broils, I pray you, and attend to the matter in hand. Stand there, Jean; there, where the light falls clearly. Now, tell me, Caryl, does his visage remind you of no one?"

"Faith, it does, my lord. He reminds me

mightily of my poor young brother, who came to so untimely an end before Jedburgh."

"Go to, he is the very marrow of John Strathbourne as he was when we fought side by side. When I first set eyes upon the youth the years rolled back. Almost I thought I was young again."

"Then there can be no doubt about the matter," and, coming to my side, the knight took my hand.

"Jean—if that be your name—Jean, do you know we are akin? Far off it may be, but as we are such good friends already, I must even dub you cousin. Cousin Jean, I give you welcome."

"Not quite so fast, I pray you," broke in my Lord of St. Edmunds, resuming his sterner manner. "If I have shown you my heart, 'tis that you, ay! and the youth also, may know how I feel in the matter. But nothing must be done in haste, all must be proved beyond cavil. At the time of his disappearance I sought for the Knight of Strathbourne far and wide, and I know that the child was with him. 'Twas a strange fancy he had, after his wife's death; the boy accompanied him everywhere. I am waiting but for one more witness. If he be still on earth, he will be here soon, and the rack will drag the truth from him. I give this youth into your charge now. Teach him how to bear himself when his birth is acknowledged; until then he had best remain unseen. Now go, I would be alone."

As I knelt to kiss my Lord Abbot's hand, with tears in my eyes, I strove to stammer out some words of gratitude. But he checked me with, "My son, this is for your father's sake. Bear yourself

now so that in future it may be for your own"; and, raising his hands, he gave me his blessing and bade me depart in peace.

I left the convent in company with Sir Paul Caryl, and directly we were outside the gates he cried joyfully:

"Jean, my kinsman, you are lucky indeed; many a young noble would give half his revenues to stand in your shoes this day. Know you that your friend, the holy father, we have just left is high in favour with my Lord Cardinal Wolsey, the greatest man in England?"

"Nay, I know nothing," I answered. "I am ignorant even of my own tongue. Truly, it all seems to me like a dream. I fear lest I wake up presently and find I have fallen asleep over my lesson with Father Felix."

"You will wake up fast enough when you find yourself, lance in hand, in the tilt-yard. I will give you my first lessons myself; I know you will be an apt pupil. As to English, that is of no consequence, since all gentlemen speak French among themselves. You need but enough to give orders to the men, and that is easily learnt. Canst ride? Dost know how to handle a horse? That is of much more consequence than English or books."

"I can ride and handle a horse; ay! and groom him, too, after service; have they not told you I was a horse-boy? But let me know, I pray you, something of my father, and how I come to be of kin to you."

It was a long story, as Sir Paul told it, for he gave me the history of my family from the time of

William the Norman. It will suffice if I say here that the Glovers, my family name, after having once been a power in the land, had sunk and dwindled until my father, the last of his race, held only one small estate, from which he derived his title of Knight of Strathbourne. 'Twas but an old tower, with a few barren acres adjoining, and even this he sold when his wife died, and crossed the water to seek better fortune in France. My father had always been a soldier, he had served both in Italy and Flanders, and had received his knighthood upon the field of battle from the hands of the Emperor himself. Sir Paul's mother had been of distant kin to my mother, that was the only relationship between us; it was out of his kindness that he called me cousin.

I now took leave of worthy Master Surbeck, the Abbot of St. Edmunds rewarding him richly for what he had done for me; and, leaving Calais for a time, I went to lodge at the little town of Guisnes, a few miles distant, where was a great forest. Here I could pursue my first exercises unobserved, my friend, the Lord Abbot, providing my equipments. It was Sir Paul who counselled my going to Guisnes; he advised it for the sake of privacy, until I learned how to bear myself. I was well content it should be so. I had no wish to shame my new friends by my ignorance. I now wore armour constantly to accustom myself to its weight, and, tutored by an old trooper my good cousin gave me for servant, I spent hours every day practising with lance, and sword, and dagger, until I was adroit enough to show myself in the tilt-

yard. Do not suppose, however, I was left only to old Aubin.

Sir Paul rode over nearly every day to break a lance with me in some quiet glade, and as soon as ever the time came he presented me to his friends. I owe a great deal to Sir Paul Caryl. I learnt from him to dress, to walk, to move with ease, to bear myself as a gentleman should; in a word, Sir Paul completed what Father Felix began. All this, of course, was not the work of a day, but I set it down here to have done with it. And it may be as well to say that as time went on, I took my part in the joust, and in all things where mere strength was concerned I held my own well. But in grace and dexterity, in the lightness of aim and bearing, which shows the really accomplished knight, I was always sadly lacking; my education had begun too late.

I was still at Guisnes, when one day a messenger arrived ordering me to wait upon my Lord Abbot at the Governor's house in Calais. By this I knew something important was in the wind, and put on one of my new suits—murrey-coloured velvet it was, I remember, slashed with tawny—with a short cloak to match. I had also a fine jewel in my plumed cap, a present from Sir Paul, and my long sword hung from a gold-embroidered baldrick. "Fine feathers make fine birds," I thought to myself as I rode gaily along, old Aubin and another servant following me. "If only the demoiselle could see me now, I doubt if she would recognise Jean the horse-boy."

On arriving at the Governor's house, I was desired to wait a while in the outer hall, where I was

treated as a person of consideration. Afterwards I was ushered into the presence of the Governor and the Abbot of St. Edmunds, who were seated on a daïs at the upper end of the room, with three men in black robes writing at a table near them. Many other people were present—gentlemen of the household, officers of justice, knights with their squires and pages—and directly I entered, all with one accord turned their gaze upon me. I should have felt much abashed, my new position as yet fitted me awkwardly, only my new kinsman, Sir Paul Caryl, came at once to my side. He led me up to the Governor, a grizzled old warrior of about sixty, and presented me as the gentleman whose business they were discussing. The Governor gave me one sharp look, spoke a few words softly to my Lord Abbot, then bade me in a courteous tone to stand aside.

All in the room were strangely silent. If anyone did mutter a word it was in a whisper; naught was to be heard save the scratching of the scribes' pens. Whilst I was wondering what it meant, suddenly the silence was broken by the echo of a prolonged scream—a scream as of one in dire agony. It seemed to come from far away, or else shut in by thick walls, but it was loud enough to startle me not a little. Everyone else, however, heard it with the utmost unconcern, the Abbot and the Governor even exchanging glances of satisfaction. Once again the dreadful cries came louder even than before, this time a quick succession of howls and groans, so horrible as to be scarcely human. Then followed a sudden silence, and all was still as death.

I guessed now what was happening. Some poor wretch was being stretched upon the rack; was being tortured until his veins burst. Why I had been sent for, what it had to do with me, was not so easily explained. After a time, a long time as it seemed to me, a door at the end of the hall was opened, and an officer with a paper in his hand approached the Governor.

"He hath confessed, my lord, at last," he said, speaking loudly, so that all might hear. "Every word of it agrees with what we have set down already."

The Abbot and the Governor took the paper eagerly, and both bent over to read it at the same time, their heads almost touching.

"It will do well," said the Governor, when he had come to the end. "'Twas an obstinate varlet, but we have got the truth from him at last. Bring him hither at once. Can he stand?"

"I fear not, my lord."

"Let him be carried, then, and see you that the gallows be in readiness outside; we shall not keep him long."

The officer made his obeisance and departed, but there was scarce time for a hum of conversation to begin before a shuffling sound was heard in the passage, and four attendants entered bearing a man upon a hand-litter. This they set down in front of the daïs, and the Governor beckoned me to approach.

"Know you aught of this fellow, young sir?" he asked. "Can you put a name to him?"

A cloth, already stained with blood, had been

thrown over the lower limbs of the poor wretch, but his face was uncovered, and in those ashen features, yet damp with the sweat of pain, I recognised my old enemy, Jacques Tapin, the murderer of my father. I recoiled involuntarily, and I suppose my expression showed somewhat of what I felt, for the Governor cried sharply: "He is known to you, I see, but speak out; we would have the dog's name."

"It is Jacques Tapin, the charcoal burner," I muttered, my horror changing almost to pity, as I saw what the unhappy man had suffered.

"Jacques Tapin, husband of the woman who confessed to you the manner of the Knight of Strathbourne's death? He whom she accused of the murder?"

"Ay, it is he!" I repeated. "No doubt about that, I should know him anywhere."

"And you, Jacques Tapin, do you know this gentleman? Stand nearer, young sir; he cannot turn his head, stoop a little over him."

I did as they bade me, but when those lack-lustre eyes met mine there was no sign of recognition, only a sort of dull surprise.

"Speak out, dog," thundered the Governor, "lest you find your way back to the rack again."

"I know him not," whispered the man faintly, "save that he hath a look of the English knight I killed so long ago."

"Think again, Jacques," I said. "Have you quite forgotten the little Jean?"

"Jean—are you he?" and, forgetting his hurts, he strove to raise himself. "Then 'tis to you I owe

this—may a thousand curses light upon your head, may you—may you——" and his voice died away, though he still kept muttering curses inaudibly.

I shrank back appalled, his words were nothing; but his expression of malignancy was fearful to witness. The Governor interposed again.

"Jacques Tapin, do you recognise this gentleman as the boy Jean, or no?"

There was a short pause while the miserable creature struggled for breath. "How can I tell?" he answered at last. "Jean was but a child when I kicked him out—may the foul fiend take his soul wherever he be. If 'tis Jean he has a scar on one foot where I threw the axe; would to Heaven it had killed him outright. I did my best but I——"

He broke off suddenly, his short-lived strength was exhausted, and he spoke no more.

"You have this scar?" asked the Governor, turning to me.

"Yes, my lord, the mark is there still."

"Bare your foot that it may be duly witnessed and entered upon the depositions; then I think all is settled."

The attendants removed my boot and hose, the scar was formally examined, then the proceedings came to an end.

Jacques Tapin, half dead already, was taken away to be hung. The Governor and the Lord Abbot—whom I had to thank for it all—then congratulated me, Sir Paul presented me to his friends, and everyone made much of me. Of course it was not for my own sake; I knew that well enough, but was I not under the protection of my Lord of St.

Edmunds, who, in his turn, was a friend of Cardinal Wolsey? I have no doubt but that my uncouth ways and lack of knowledge provoked many smiles behind my back. All the same it was pleasant not to be looked upon as an upstart, to be made free of the company at once.

I quitted Guisnes soon after this, and took up my quarters with Sir Paul, and it was then that he asked me by what name I would choose to be known.

"You may use either Glover or Strathbourne, which you will," he said; "you have a right to both."

"Strathbourne, most assuredly," I answered at once. "I will be John of Strathbourne as my father was before me."

"That will please my Lord of St. Edmunds well. When you win your spurs I should not be surprised if he bought you back your old estate with a few fat acres added on to it. I met my lord at the Governor's last night, and he intrusted me with a message. His business here is nearly concluded, he will soon be returning to England. If your wishes run that way he will take you in his train, and do his best to push your fortunes. Or you may remain here with me as my esquire, and take your chance of what Fate sends you. Now King Francis is free again we shall not rust in idleness for long. These are stirring times. With France or against her, it matters not which, there will be plenty of blows going shortly."

"Then I do not hesitate for a moment," I replied gratefully. "If it is in accordance with the wishes

of my Lord Abbot, to serve as your esquire would be only too great an honour for me, that is, if you are not afraid of my inexperience."

"I am not afraid," and he laughed cheerily. "Remember we have fought side by side once already. By the way, I settled accounts with both those young gentlemen; I doubt if they are even yet risen from their beds. Your friend in green had already had enough of it; you have spoilt his good looks for all time. But now to my Lord of St. Edmunds, and tell him of your decision; he means, I know, to allow you a fair sum for maintenance. If we go soon into Italy, as I hear rumours, there will be a chance for you to win your spurs."

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE FIELD.

Sir Paul Caryl was not wrong when he said those were stirring times, though the years fly so fast that already have they passed into history. I had been my cousin's esquire a bare three months, when the sack of Rome by Bourbon's brigands stirred all Europe, and England and France entered into an alliance to set the Pope free. Our King Harry, who had not many troops to spare, agreed to provide the greater part of the money, whilst Francis found the men.

Sir Paul, though he had wife and children at home, threw up his cap like any beardless boy when war was at last declared; he was so tired of remaining in idleness at Calais. The French army, under Odet de Foix, Lord of Lautrec, was to cross the Alps as soon as possible; and, by favour of my Lord of St. Edmunds, he received permission to join as a volunteer.

"If I bring a few score of stout fellows, be sure King Francis will give me command of a company," he cried, "so bestir yourself, sir squire, and rout me out every unemployed soldier in Calais. Promise them fair pay, and a good share of the plunder; it

will go hard with us if we cannot catch some crows worth the plucking."

I spare you all the mighty preparations of the next month, and how, with Aubin's aid, I got together a body of stout Englishmen, who afterwards did us good service. Then, with Sir Paul's pennon leading the van, and our little army of spears bristling behind, we marched across France to join the main army.

One thing I did, however, before starting; I destroyed my marriage contract. I was loth to part with it, loth to break the one link that still bound me to the demoiselle, but I had no choice. If aught happened to me on the field of battle I could not tell into whose hands it might fall. Therefore, to make all safe, I burnt the paper to the last scrap, and strewed the ashes to the winds.

We stayed for a few days in Paris—which I now saw under very different auspices—until Sir Paul obtained from King Francis command of a company of men-at-arms. It was given to him almost for the asking, so anxious was the French King to please the English; Cardinal Wolsey being, even then, on the road to Paris to negotiate a fresh treaty. This favour raised a great jealousy against my cousin, which, in the end, had liked to have proved our undoing. At the time, however, we did not know of this, and, as soon as possible, he hurried on by forced marches to reach the army, being eager to take up his command before it crossed the Alps. I have not told you anything of the gay doings at Paris, of the *fêtes* the King gave—at all of which I was present—nor how strange it often

seemed to me, that I, the brigands' horse-boy, the priest's serving-man, should be ruffling it with the best. If I speak of it at all it is only to show that my time at Calais had not been thrown away. My kinsman could take me into the company even of noble ladies, and I did not make him feel ashamed. Not that I ever attained the smoothness of a courtier. I was always a soldier, rough and plain; but I passed in the crowd; no one took notice of me.

On the way we halted for one night, not very far from my old village of Cléville, and, when my duties were performed, I rode over to pay a visit to Father Felix. I was anxious to make the good old man acquainted with my happy fortune, and thank him anew for all his kindness to me. Alas! he was gone, and a stranger filled his place, a round plump little priest, whose rubicund visage showed signs of the wine-bottle. Father Felix had died some three months after my departure. He caught the pestilence, whilst ministering to the needs of his people, and in a few days all was over. It was a sore blow to me, and I rode away sad at heart. But youth is ever selfish, and in the bustle of the march I fear he was soon forgotten.

I do not think I need set down any particulars of the first part of our march into Italy. We joined Lautrec in good time, crossed the Alps without more than the usual difficulty, and, marching towards the Papal States, took and ravaged such hostile towns as came in our way. It was before one of these that the trouble began.

Sir Paul had been dissatisfied for some time with

the treatment he received from Marshal Lautrec. Our troop was kept always in the rear; unless, indeed, nothing but hard blows were expected, when we were sent to the front readily enough. But were any renown to be gotten, were there any chance of plunder or of knightly prisoners who could be put to ransom, some excuse was sure to be found for ordering us elsewhere. The men grumbled openly. It was as much as I could do to keep our Englishmen in order; they saw too plainly that whilst they did the work, others received the reward. The true reason of this leaked out gradually. Marshal Lautrec had destined the company bestowed upon Sir Paul for a friend of his own. He disliked my kinsman for being an Englishman, disliked him still more for taking his friend's place, and wanted to be quit of him. He would not affront him openly; my cousin had too many friends at court for that, and outwardly the marshal was most courteous. Everything was put down to the score of military necessity, and, as Sir Paul had engaged to serve under Lautrec, he had no choice but to obey.

Still this did not render him any the less dissatisfied, especially as there was a great deal going on during this insignificant siege he could not understand. For one thing, the town was but a small place, we had plenty of artillery, it could have been taken in a day. Yet we remained encamped before it for nearly a week, wasting valuable time and demoralising the army.

At last, one morning, there was a great movement in the camp, trumpets sounded, horses were

harnessed, preparations were making all around, not—to my astonishment—for an assault, but for departure. Our company alone remained idle, for they had received no orders. Sir Paul had been summoned to wait upon the marshal. Of late, since I had some practice in the field, my cousin had made me second in command. I now had the baggage packed, the tents prepared for removal at a moment's notice, and the men under arms, ready either for marching or for fighting. Time went on; the van-guard of the army was already in motion; not a tent, save ours, remained on the plain, and still Sir Paul came not. At length, to my joy, for I began to fear something had happened, he came toward us at full gallop and waving me aside, as I advanced to meet him, pulled up in front of the troop. He looked very discomposed, I thought, at first glance, but, as he halted, his face cleared, and speaking, in ringing tones, that all could hear:

"My men," he cried, "I have good news for you. Our noble commander thinks we have scarce had our fair share of plunder lately"—at this there arose such a loud murmur of assent he was forced to hold up his hand for silence, then he continued: "My Lord the Marshal has been good enough to leave the town yonder for us. Ours is to be the glory of taking it, and, whether we hold it to ransom or give it up to plunder, all the booty is to us. Meanwhile, until I have had time to make the necessary dispositions, back to quarters, where a double ration of wine will be served out to each one of you."

This put the men into high good humour, as you may suppose, and, without troubling themselves as to how the project was to be carried through, they gave a loud cheer for the brave English captain; then broke up to seek their wine. Nor was I in the least perturbed. I doubted not but that terms had been already made, and that the town was on the point of surrendering. I was quickly undeceived, however, for, presently, waiting on Sir Paul in his tent, I found him pacing to and fro in hot anger. When he saw my look of surprise he stopped short and burst into a fit of bitter laughter.

"How now, Jean?" he cried, "you seemed as pleased just now as the simple knaves. Think you we have but to knock at the gates over yonder and they will be opened to us?"

"Something of the kind, yes," I replied boldly; "since it would be beyond our power to do otherwise. The last of the artillery was filing off as I came in, and not a gun has been fired against the walls. We are not expected to remain here, I suppose, with our hands folded."

"That is just it, Jean; you have hit the right nail on the head. We are expected to sit here with our hands folded. My Lord of Lautrec hath received letters speeding him on his way; he cannot stay to reduce the town, neither can he leave it unguarded in his rear. My one company will be strong enough to hold it in check, he tells me; there is no fear of any sortie. My orders are to remain encamped here until the town yields, or we receive the necessary reinforcements to enable us to take it.

As neither event is in the least likely to happen, it means that we are planted here until the campaign is over."

"Is it the marshal's way of getting rid of you?" I asked, my face falling long as a hatchet. Here was an end, indeed, of my fine dreams of glory and renown.

"You have hit it again. Yet he might have accomplished his design in more honourable fashion. Nor did the marshal even stop at this. Knowing that the troops left here were as good as wasted, he wanted to rob me of my Englishmen and give me rabble. He had heard rumours, said my lord blandly, that my men were discontented, that their greed for plunder had not been satisfied. He would take them on with him and give me an equal number of lands-knechts instead. And from a glance that passed between them he meant Vigo's men, I vow, the most disorderly scum in the whole army. It had been talked over and agreed upon I could see."

"You did not consent?" I exclaimed, in dismay, for the English were the men I could most rely upon; they were the backbone of the whole company.

"No, by St. George, else were I the craven he seems to think me. I consented to remain as he commanded, because such were the conditions of my service; I was to take my orders from Marshal Lautrec. But duty carried me no further, though I kept my temper, and did not allow him to put me in the wrong. I told him the Englishmen grumbled no more than the others; unfortunately, there

was a feeling among them all that they had not been treated fairly, but I had them well in hand, and could answer for their good behaviour. As for changing my English knaves for German lands-knechts, with all due deference to my lord's wishes, I would prefer to keep them. Still he persisted, he wanted them sorely, my brave little handful, and I had been so submissive, he thought he had but to press the matter and it was done. By Heaven, I would give much to speak my mind to him for just five minutes, then stand before him sword in hand," and Sir Paul smote the bench in his anger until it shook under him. "Again, I kept my temper, Jean; 'twas my lord abbot taught me that, and I pass it on to you; give not your adversary an advantage by losing your temper. I answered my lord fairly, but my meaning was plain enough. If he robbed me of my best men I would throw up my command, and carry my tale with all speed to King Francis. My Lord of Lautrec saw then he had gone too far, he drew back, and we parted on the best of terms. The dastard, the knave, to treat a gentleman thus! I will be even with him, Jean; we must take this town."

I stared in astonishment, thinking Sir Paul's anger had affected his wits. But he meant what he said.

"Ay, I am in earnest, lad. Not by open force, that, of course, is out of the question; but by stratagem or starvation, or by bribing those within. I will have it if it costs my life. Leave me now and let me think. Mind, I look to you to help me with the men. Each one of them will have to do

the work of three, and yet they must be kept in good humour. Feed them well, keep the foraging parties at work; that will go a long way towards it." And with that I left him to think out his plans alone.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SIEGE.

Two weeks more passed, and the situation was unchanged, save that we had to ride farther and farther afield to find victualling. We had established a cordon round the town as far as we could with our scanty numbers; and though we knew well that messengers contrived to slip in and out, at least no convoy could get through, so their food supplies must in time come to an end. Also, we managed to deceive them very neatly, lest they should attempt to sally out and attack us. Leaving only the sentries, we sent the men quietly out of the camp, two or three at a time, to assemble at an appointed spot; then they marched back again with noise of trumpets and sham pennons flying, as if we had been reinforced by an army. Afterwards Sir Paul sent me with a herald and a flag of truce to summon them to surrender. But the commander was too old a hand to be thus cheated. He knew we had no artillery, and, save that he was polite, would have laughed in my face. His answer was sharp and to the point. "Tell your captain to make a breach in my walls, sir squire; then I will talk of surrendering."

In spite of this, my errand was very far from being fruitless. I spoke to the Governor from without the walls; I was not admitted inside, and, whilst waiting his arrival, I scrutinised the ground closely. To enable you to understand what followed, it will be necessary to explain something of the configuration of the town. Though a place of small size, encircled on three sides by a wide river, it was surrounded with lofty walls, intersected with massive towers, and every gate was strongly fortified. On one side, where the river almost washed the walls, rose the citadel, its high commanding battlements towering over both town within and plain without. Our camp was on the open side of the town, with the river to right and left of us, but the principal gate was beneath the citadel, where had once been a massive stone bridge. This had been destroyed on our approach; only a few of the arches remained.

When I took the flag of truce I rode to the gate nearest our camp, where, after a little parleying, I was directed to ride on, for the Governor would answer me from the citadel. We had never been able to get close to this part of the wall before; the river was too deep to be forded, and, besides, a well-directed fire from the battlements kept us always at a distance. The Governor kept me some time before he made his appearance—the better, I suppose, to assert his dignity—and whilst waiting I scanned the walls, idly at first, and then with keen observation. To my surprise, the citadel was built partly upon a rock, which at this point took the place of the wall—a steep, almost perpendicular cliff, surmounted by a crenulated rampart. I gazed upon

it eagerly. The cliff looked inaccessible, yet I thought I had climbed as steep. Given a dark night and a careless guard, I did not think the feat impossible. What to do when the summit was gained was not quite so easy to tell. The alarm given, the doors closed below, we should be caught like rats in a trap. And another thing, before thinking of surprising the citadel, it would first be necessary to reach it. We could not pass beneath the walls as I had just done; so sharp a watch was kept, especially at night, that the slightest movement was discovered. But here beneath the citadel they might not be so vigilant; they would rely upon the protection of the river.

The Governor still failing to appear, I yawned and turned slowly round, with my back to the citadel, as if weary of waiting. I had the river before my eyes now, and the broken bridge close beneath me. The stream was at its narrowest here, the banks having been artificially raised to keep the water from flooding. That at this point it was too deep to ford, the current too strong to swim, I knew already, but the well-served citadel guns had always prevented us from examining more closely. I saw now that the destruction of the bridge had been very thorough, only a single arch remaining on one side to show what once had been. On the other side, however, part of the lower masonry was still standing, an uneven ledge, a few inches wide, just above the surface of the water. A spear's length from each shore it broke off short, but there were no gaps in the centre.

I had barely time to note all this when the Gov-

ernor and his attendants came out upon the battlements, and summarily dismissed me as I have said. Still, I had seen a good deal, and when I returned I reported to Sir Paul, and told him how I thought it might be possible to surprise the citadel. He listened eagerly at first, but shook his head when he heard how I proposed to cross the river. For a small body to effect a diversion it might answer, he thought; for the whole troop it would be impossible. I urged him to allow me to make a trial at least, and he gave way, commanding me only to use every caution.

That was all I wanted, permission just to try my plan, and I picked out a couple of men to accompany me. I would have taken old Aubin—he was so quick to understand, so thoroughly to be depended upon—but I feared his joints were too stiff for the work in hand. I took, therefore, another Englishman instead, a man who would follow where I led; for the other I chose my sergeant, an agile Swiss, skilled in mountain climbing. For in our small company we had men of all nations; besides our own English, there were French, Swiss, Germans, and Italians. Only we had no Spanish. They were on the other side; they fought always for the Emperor.

My two men were perfectly willing to help me in my enterprise, especially as I promised them a good reward, and the following night we stole quietly out of camp and made for the bend of the river. The part I was most doubtful about met us at the beginning. The broken parapet was much farther from land on our side than on the other.

The question was, could we hit upon it in the darkness, or should we be carried down by the current? I explained before we started exactly what each one was to do, and directly we reached the river side, with a rope round my waist, I entered the water to show the way and give my followers confidence. They held the other end of the rope until I jerked it thrice to show I was safe, when they were to fasten it to a spearhead in the bank and it would serve to guide them. We were clad only in our buff; all armour had been left behind, both to avoid noise, and that we might be less encumbered. We did not even carry swords, nothing but the dagger each wore in his belt; and our boots we fastened round our necks, lest they should fill with water and sink us.

The water was above my knees at once, then to my waist, and as I waded steadily on, bearing always against the current, it came up to my arm-pits, and I feared I should be swept away. But I had kept my course well. I could see the broken parapet looming through the darkness only a few paces ahead. I pressed forward; I could almost touch it when I struck my knee against a block of submerged masonry with such violence as to knock me over. Happily, I threw out my arms as I fell, and just caught the edge of the parapet. Here I hung for a few moments, half insensible. In falling my head had come in contact with the stone, and the shock had stunned me. I had sense enough left, however, to cling fast; and the blood trickling down my face, and the cold water about my legs, soon revived me.

It was a nasty fall, but I had gained the parapet. That was the chief thing, and, as soon as my understanding came back, I crawled a little farther and jerked the rope. It was easier for my companions, they had the rope to hold by—I had made it fast my end—and when Bouquet, the Swiss, came in sight, I warned him of the sunken stone. He passed the word on to Jervis, and both reached my side without mishap. We were now about a fourth of the way over, clinging to the remains of the parapet, a slender thread of stone, scarce seven inches in width, and so little above the level of the water that every now and then it washed over us. We crawled along this face downwards, stretched out full length, and holding on like grim death for our lives. I was very glad, I can tell you, when we reached the end; my bruised knee did not make it any easier for me. There was not much difficulty in landing. We were so near the bank when the parapet ended that the water came scarce to our waists. The danger now was the risk of discovery. We were fairly within the enemy's lines, the alarm might be given any moment. Heaven be praised, nothing happened; we reached the shore unperceived, and threw ourselves flat among the bushes. We waited here awhile to take breath and put our boots on, and then, finding all was still, we crept on, still crawling upon the ground, until we arrived at the foot of the citadel. Here, for the first time, we ventured to stand upright. The battlemented walls, high up above our heads, loomed dimly through the darkness. We could just discern the glimmer of the guns; could hear the tread of the sentinel as

he paced his round, his steps dying away and then coming nearer again. It was Bouquet who took the lead now. Besides a length of rope, he had provided himself with a few iron cramps, such as were used in his native mountains, by the aid of which he could climb the steepest precipice. The difficulty was to insert them without noise. Standing upon my shoulder, he felt about high up as he could, until he encountered a small crevice. He pushed his cramp into this—whether it would hold or not we had to find out—then he hung his rope upon it. By means of this he was able to insert a second cramp higher up still, and this he repeated twice again. Then the cliff becoming broken, he was able to climb with his hands and feet. It was a time of terrible suspense to me. He was obliged to work very slowly, desisting every time the sentinel approached. The minutes passed like hours. Every moment I expected to be discovered. It was a welcome sight, indeed, when the rope came dangling down to show all was ready for me to follow. Jervis was not to climb; he was to remain below on guard, and hoot like an owl at the first sign of danger.

When I pulled myself up I found my Swiss safely ensconced in a small hollow immediately beneath the battlement. There was only room for one, and he dared not move, the tramp of the sentry was so close. Holding fast to the rope, I flattened myself against the cliff until the unsuspecting man had passed by, his footsteps exactly over our heads.

"Shall I kill him, lieutenant?" whispered the Swiss in my ear. "If I jump up now and lie in

wait I warrant he will not make a sound." And he was about to slip over when I caught his arm.

"Not for the world," I whispered angrily; "it would spoil everything. I have learned all I want now; I will go down, and when you come remove the cramps carefully, that they may not find out we have been."

We made our way back to the river without discovery, crawled over the parapet again, and arrived on our own side without accident. I had accomplished my task: I had proved it possible to gain a footing within the citadel; but there the matter ended. Sir Paul still deemed the attempt too hazardous, unless an attack could be made simultaneously at some other point; and he did not see his way to this, we were hampered so terribly by our lack of numbers.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SPY.

NOTWITHSTANDING my cousin's hesitation, I am sure in the end he would have risked the attempt. Time was passing, and the men at last were inclined to doubt. Presently they would begin to desert, and we should be left helpless. Then, as it chanced, a piece of great good luck befel us. Aubin brought in a prisoner he had captured trying to make his way into the town. He was a country fellow, clad in a peasant's frock and belt, and speaking such vile patois, Sir Paul had to call in one of the Italians to interpret. He seemed harmless, and gave a very plausible account of himself, an account I did not doubt in the slightest. He had been working for his lord before the wars began, on a farm some miles away. His wife and children were within the town, and he wanted to join them. Still, Sir Paul was not satisfied, and on stricter search being made, a letter was at last discovered very cunningly concealed among his clothes. It bore no address, but, when opened, it was found to be a missive sent by one of the Imperialist generals to acquaint the Governor that a company of lands-knechts were on their way to raise the siege. A small band would come in

advance, and enter the town in secret by the usual way; the main body would arrive later, and on signal being given the enemy would be attacked both in front and rear.

This was rather startling. We certainly had not expected help to reach the town from outside. Marshal Lautrec did not seem to be pressing the enemy very closely. Sir Paul tried hard to get information from the messenger about this secret way, but the fellow pretended to know nothing. He was sent out to be flogged with a stirrup leather to quicken his wits; but though he made noise enough under the infliction to rouse the camp, his answer when he came back was still the same. He had been paid to carry the letter and knew nothing of the contents. As for any secret way, he knew of none; he wished he had, for then he would not have been captured. And to this he stuck though Sir Paul vowed he would have him hung on the nearest tree, and ordered the rope to be made ready. But all was to no purpose, he kept to the same tale.

"It is possible the fellow is speaking the truth, after all," said Sir Paul to me, with a laugh, "for true enough he knows not what he is carrying. You have not heard all; listen, this is the rest of it," and he read aloud, translating the Italian into French for my benefit:

"'I have retained your messenger to guide us on the way. The fellow I send is a knavish, thieving rascal, who would not budge a step without three gold pieces in hand. He was to receive three more from you; flog him instead until his bones are bare, and keep him fast until all is over.' This, I rather

fancy," my cousin continued, "will be news to the bearer. It may be as well to let him know what his good friends intend for him."

"I do not think you need," I returned quietly, for I had been watching the man whilst Sir Paul read. Flogging had had no effect upon him; even at the prospect of being hung he had not wavered. But at those unexpected words—read in a tongue he was supposed not to understand—he forgot his part, his boorishness dropped from him like a mask, he was keenly alert and intelligent. Seeing that he was detected, he advanced a step, and, waving the interpreter aside, said in good French:

"Pardon, monsieur, but may I see that letter?" adding, as if to himself, "It may be but a ruse after all."

"No ruse, my friend, but sober truth," replied Sir Paul, giving him the paper. "Can you read, then, as well as speak to us in our own tongue?"

"I was brought up by a priest, monsieur, and lived for a time in France. Ay, ay, it is true!" after scanning the writing closely. "The red-faced dog, he shall pay dear for having served me such a trick. You may send away your trooper, monsieur, I am ready now to answer your questions."

I have said that our force was not half numerous enough to properly surround the town, and where we had the river behind us we kept little guard. As it chanced, however, there was a second ford we knew nothing about hard by a narrow ditch that flowed towards the walls. I had leaped my horse over the ditch scores of times, but as we did not know the river could be crossed, had given little

heed to it. Now we found it was used as a regular channel of communication, messengers passing freely to and fro.

"You would never have caught me had I kept to it," said the spy; "but I was too clever. I thought I would find out something of your force in order to earn my money better. Flog me until my bones are bare! Ay, and they would have done it, too. I know my Lord Governor of old. Let me serve you, monsieur; I ask no fee or reward, I want only to be revenged."

"How can I tell you will not betray me? I have given you one flogging already?"

The fellow grinned from ear to ear. "That was all in the bargain, I bear you no malice for that. And it was a flea-bite, all said, I did but howl to keep up my character. As for betraying you—reflect, monsieur, did I drop a word, did I let you know aught, before I discovered they had betrayed me first?"

"I can answer for it you did not, my friend."

"Nor would I, monsieur, not even if you had hung me, as you threatened. But now, now"—and his hands clenched with passion—"only show me what to do, and you will see whether or not I can be faithful."

It was early in the night, not much past ten o'clock, when the messenger was captured; morning was just beginning to dawn when a little party of us watched him steal into the ditch we had passed unnoticed so often. He was making his way into the town as he had at first intended, only he carried a different letter. Not much had been altered

—saving always the reward to be given to the bearer —only the arrival of the lands-knechts had been hastened; they were to reach the town that same night. In their place would come Sir Paul with a score of picked men, who, directly they were admitted, would seize upon the gate and admit the others. To me was assigned the honour of leading a second attack by way of the citadel. Thus taken by surprise in two places at once, we hoped to gain both town and fortress before they could rally. The attempt was to be made so soon because nothing could be gained by waiting; on the contrary, the least delay might be fatal. Instead of attacking we might be attacked instead, and have to fight for our lives.

Towards evening, fortunately for our purpose, there was every sign of an approaching storm. Thick clouds rolled up from the south, the wind moaned ominously, the heavens were dark and threatening.

I had fifty men with me, every one of whom I had chosen myself—tall fellows, and stalwart, able to breast the waters. A little before the time of starting the rain began to come down in torrents, and the sky was black as pitch. This suited me well, and I marched my troop off in a hurry, before the rain should swell the volume of the river, and render the parapet impassable.

We crossed in the same fashion as before; Bouquet leading the way this time, whilst I remained upon the bank to see the last one over. Had the sentinel looked down from above we must have seemed to him like a row of great beetles crossing

the water in single file; but he gave no sign. For one thing it was so dark he could not have seen anything; for another, from the dry state in which we found him later it was easy to see he had left his post. The driving rain had driven him to take shelter within; he paid for the carelessness with his life.

In crossing that slender parapet, out of all my men I lost only three. They missed their hold and were swept away in an instant—their despairing cries lost amid the tumult of the storm. We carried no firearms, for the water would have rendered them useless, but each man had his pike fastened to his back. By the time we were all across the rain had somewhat abated. We could have done with it well for a little longer, as the lightning now began to play, rendering our movements far too visible. The men, lying flat upon the ground, disposed themselves amongst the low bushes with which the shore was fringed, while Bouquet and I crept forward between the flashes to the foot of the citadel. The sentry had come back to his post again; we could hear the tramp, tramp of his feet upon the stone just as before. And here, notwithstanding all the trouble I had taken, I was like, by my overeagerness, to have spoiled all. We had brought rope-ladders with us this time. Bouquet fixed the irons, and soon had them dangling, and we reached the embrasure unchallenged. I sprang forward, wanting to be the first to set foot upon the tower, when my wounded knee gave way and I fell. All would have been lost had it not been for my brave comrade. The sentinel paused and looked over, but

before he could give the alarm Bouquet was upon him. He sprang over the opening like a cat, his dagger rose and fell. One low groan and all was still.

I had not fallen very far, the ladder came in my way, and I clutched hold of it. Once assured all was safe I soon scrambled up again, and we gave the appointed signal. The men ran across in the dark—ten at a time as I had ordered—and soon they swarmed up, each man pike in hand, ready for action.

I was to wait now, if I could, until I heard something of Sir Paul; it would depend upon how long we were undiscovered. We managed with little noise to turn the guns so as to command the town; and, whilst a small party kept watch each side the low door that gave entrance to the tower, the rest of us leaned over the battlements watching anxiously. Though the rain had ceased, the storm was not yet over. The thunder kept up a low muttered rumble in the distance, and the lightning, though the flashes came at longer intervals, was still marvellously vivid. Presently, as we gazed, all was lit up before us, the whole town was spread out at our feet. We could see each tower and gate, the whole round of ramparts, the low houses with their tiled roofs, the churches rising from the narrow streets, all spread out as if on a map. For one moment only; then darkness fell like a thick black curtain —a darkness that could be felt. We waited breathlessly for the next; we knew now what point to fix our eyes upon, and the second time we saw a body of men moving through the street, the lightning,

playing about their steel caps, revealing them plainly. Yet a third flash and the conflict had begun. There was not much firing, for waiting in the rain had damped their powder; it was all done by push of pike.

"It is our turn now; keep together, men, and follow me!" I cried, and, leading the way, I rushed down the narrow flight of stone steps which led into the interior of the citadel. The guard-room was below, where the principal part of the garrison were assembled, and shouting our war-cry, we burst in upon them.

The surprise was complete. The Governor was absent, having gone to meet the expected landsknechts; there was scarce any resistance at all. They were struck with panic at the sudden irruption of an enemy, coming they knew not whence, and *sauve qui peut* was the cry. The drawbridge was down before we even reached the court-yard, and, pushing and struggling as to which should get out first, they rushed into the streets, crying: "The citadel is taken, the enemy is in the town!" We gained the place almost without striking a blow; without the loss of a single man. The only blood shed was that of the unfortunate sentinel.

Once the place was ours I hurried back to the ramparts and sent three shots booming over the town; the signal agreed upon to let Sir Paul know we had succeeded. When the noise and smoke had passed away, the din of arms from the streets below came plainly to my ears. There were bursts of flame and clash of steel, and signs of a wild confusion;

yet if our men had gained much way they ought to have been nearer. They were meeting with a more stubborn resistance than we had, that was evident. I rushed down again, and leaving Bouquet and a dozen men in charge, ordering them to raise the drawbridge directly I had departed, I sallied out at the head of the remainder to take the foe in the rear. But the worst was over; the enemy had begun to yield before we arrived. The flying troops from the citadel had infected the others with their panic; they were gradually melting away. The townsmen, in particular, slipped down the neighbouring alleys, to hide while they could. The commander and a small body of the garrison fought bravely, however, to the end. Sir Paul offered them their lives if they would yield, but they were furious at being so outwitted, and, setting their backs to the wall, perished to the last man. We were victorious everywhere. The place was ours.

When the necessary dispositions had been made, the gates closed, and a watch set, the town was given over to pillage as Sir Paul had promised. I had never been present at the sack of a town before, and, notwithstanding my apprenticeship among the brigands, the cruel savagery made me verily sick. If I had had more experience I should have taken no heed of such a small affair; scenes I witnessed later dwarfed it into insignificance. But, owing, I suppose, to my unfortunate up-bringing, my sympathies were with the wretched people, and I did all in my power to save some of them. Little enough it was, for though there must needs be war —or what would become of noble knights and gal-

lant men?—yet 'tis always the helpless who pay for it.

We remained four days in the town, both to rest the men and to collect the plunder; then with a train of heavily-laden mules and horses we set out to rejoin Marshal Lautrec. But first we razed the citadel to the ground, blowing up the massive walls with gunpowder, and set the rest of the town on fire. It was burning fiercely when we marched away, and it made my heart ache to see the poor creatures steal out of their hiding-places and wring their hands about the blazing ruins. My pouch was full of gold pieces—part of my share of the plunder—and, making some excuse that my real purpose might not be known, I rode back and emptied it amongst them. Yet was I terribly afraid lest my softheartedness should be known. I should have felt shamed indeed if my men had seen me.

CHAPTER XXI.

ISPARI.

When we came up with Marshal Lautrec we found him encamped with his whole army without the walls of Ispari, the chief city in that part of Italy. It was a place of some size, governed by its Duke, an independent sovereign and ally of France. Ispari was a beautiful city to look upon. The churches and principal edifices were built of fair white marble, fountains and gleaming statues were at every street corner, and the grand ducal palace rose from the centre of an open square. This palace was partly new and partly old. The main building and two long wings were of modern date, but there was a massive round-tower from which the Duke's flag floated, standing apart and alone, which evidently had belonged to some more ancient building. There was no moat or drawbridge to the palace; nothing but a high wall with three strong gates, each provided with a small guard-house. And even this slight defence was somewhat disguised. The raised parapet inside the walls had been converted into a terrace with balustrades and statues; there was a row of orange trees in full bloom masking the sentries, whilst in the great courtyard a mar-

ble fountain, surrounded by banks of flowers, was always merrily playing. Still, all was not quite so peaceful as it seemed, as you will hear presently.

Our arrival in camp, heavily laden with plunder, was greeted with acclamations. The capture of the town by our scanty numbers had been considered so impossible, that even the most envious could not forbear their applause. My lord the marshal was most gracious, and bestowed upon my kinsman great commendation.

"Plenty of fine words, Jean," Sir Paul said; "nothing more, not even a reward for you. I do not believe either that he was too well pleased; for though he forced his lips to smile his tell-tale eyes betrayed him. However, we are both supposed to be in high favour at present; you must unpack your baggage and have out your gala suit, for we sup with the Duke to-night, and afterwards pay our court to the Duchess. I have given you your due, young man, and your reputation precedes you; I have told them the story of the capture of the citadel. You will have to stand a hotter fire now; the eyes of the Italian ladies are very deadly."

I would much rather have remained in the camp, and, so I said, for I was too rough and awkward to feel at home with court ladies; but Sir Paul only laughed and bade me make haste and get ready.

I was quite sincere in desiring to remain behind; yet when I put on my court dress, a new suit I had never worn before, I regarded myself with some complacency. Now that my eyes are dim, and my back bowed with age, I may say, without vanity, I was not wanting in comeliness. I was tall and

well-formed, with yellow hair and bright blue eyes, and my martial exercises had given ease and dignity to my bearing. And my costume of azure blue, slashed with white satin, became my skin well, though 'twas but a plain dress with scarce a jewel about it. The gallants at the court of King Francis were wont to carry a fortune upon their persons—doublet, cap, belt, sword-hilt, even their very shoes, all glittering with precious stones. I was content, however, else had I been most ungrateful, and once again the thought came to me—if the demoiselle could but see me! It was not strange that I should think of her on that particular night. She was so often in my thoughts. I realised better of late days what a terrible thing that enforced marriage must have been to her. She was quit of it long ago, I had no doubt; yet the remembrance of such a humiliation must ever be painful. Could she but know at some future time—when, perhaps, by some gallant deed I had made my name famous—that her one-time husband was not the low-born churl she imagined, then her thoughts of me might be less bitter. I had fancied something of this before, when my birthright was first restored to me, as I think I have mentioned already; this time it was my self-satisfaction, my fine appearance, that recalled the demoiselle to me so strongly. Alas, my vanity was short-lived; it soon received a grievous blow.

In due time I made my obeisance to the Duke, and Sir Paul presenting me as his kinsman, I was graciously received, and the supper passed off very well. There were no ladies present; their company was not desired when the Duke supped. The party

was composed of the Duke and Italian nobles, members of his household, Marshal de Lautrec and his officers, and others—in all a gay and gallant company, in whose society I much enjoyed myself. The Duke was past middle age, a stout, jovial-looking man, too corpulent almost to mount upon horseback, and devoted heart and soul to the pleasures of the table. He was more like a German than an Italian, and, in truth, he had much German blood in his veins. In politics he took no part, the city being governed really by his chief minister, the Grand Chamberlain, and the Duchess, who were at daggers drawn. The Duke had no direct heir. The Chamberlain had some claim in right of his wife, and many in the city were his partisans.

You must not suppose I learnt all this that first night, or for many nights after; it was taught me later by the force of circumstances. It chanced to be my fate, as you will see, to interfere with some of my Lord Chamberlain's plans, and in the end I did not get the worst of it. And all was rose-colour at first. The Chamberlain, who ranked at court next to the Duke himself, could not make enough of us, and after all courtesies to Sir Paul, had even a few gracious words to spare for me. And it was he who, when the feast was ended—the Duke and many of his friends being scarce in a fit state to leave the table—conducted us to the apartments of the Duchess. These were situated in the opposite wing of the palace; we had to pass through many rooms and a long corridor before—our approach heralded by merry talk and noisy laughter—we were ushered into the presence chamber. This

was a wide gallery, sumptuously adorned with paintings and sculptures, and with many long windows opening on to a marble terrace.

The Duchess sat beneath a canopy at the upper end, with a little group of ladies standing behind her. Sir Paul Caryl and a few other strangers were presented in due form; then I also had the honour of kneeling before Her Highness, and she spoke very kindly to me concerning the capture of the city. The Duchess was a tall and stately lady, of noble presence and dignified in manner. She was not young, almost, indeed, past middle age, yet with the remains of great beauty. Directly the formal reception was over, all was ease and gaiety. The cavaliers mingled with the ladies; there was music and song and dancing, witty talk and mirthful laughter; never had I been present at so gay a scene.

One of the court ladies, taking compassion, I think, upon my shyness, came where I stood a little apart, and tried to talk to me. Unfortunately she had not much French, I still less Italian—when we had exhausted a few stock phrases, conversation became difficult. Presently she signed to me to follow, and, talking volubly in her own tongue, led me across the room. I could not understand half she said, but could just manage to make out she was going to take me to one from my own land. There was a little group round the lady she sought; as they made way for us I bowed low, without looking up. I saw nothing but her dress, a vision of white and silver and gleaming gems. As I raised my head I saw the lady's face for the first

time—it was Mademoiselle de Suresne. Our eyes met. She knew me. One glance told me that. Yet did she show no astonishment, but returning my salute with cold and distant courtesy, resumed her conversation with a cavalier by her side. I was too startled and confused to stammer out a word, and I saw a smile on many lips at my awkwardness. In truth, the demoiselle was more prepared for the meeting than I was. She had been one of the ladies attending the Duchess, and had recognised me directly.

They were a merry group, all talking and laughing. They had smiled at my want of manners, but no one seemed to notice the deadly pallor that gradually overspread the lady's face, or how her lips and hands were trembling. I waited for a while amid the throng; then, as she took no notice of me, I quietly slipped away. I needed to be alone to collect my scattered senses, and took refuge in a deep recess, where I was partly hid by a curtain. Yet I could not take my eyes from the demoiselle. She had always been beautiful in my sight; yet never had I deemed she could shine so fair as she did that night. In a moment all my new-born vanity was dashed to the ground; once again I felt myself a churl beside her.

Hidden by the curtain, I watched, as I thought, unseen. I would not have troubled her for the world; yet I think she must have felt my gaze. She moved restlessly, turned half round, then suddenly turning back again, gave me one long look in return. All that it expressed I could not understand. There was the old scorn, the old reproach

I knew so well; but, besides, there was a look of fear, almost of terror, I could not make out at all. Surely of all people in the world the demoiselle had no reason to be afraid of me. I thought it must be that my gaze had affronted her, and, resolutely turning my back, I looked out of the window. It was a bright moonlight night; the fountains were playing; the marble terraces lit up by tiny lamps. And presently, the dance having ceased, some doors were thrown open, and many of the company strolled out to enjoy the cooler air.

As I stood looking upon them I felt a smart tap upon my shoulder, and, turning, was confronted by Mademoiselle de Suresne.

"Monsieur, you have been confided to my care," she said, with a forced smile. "If it so please you, we will go look at the fountain I spoke of just now."

I bowed and held out my hand to conduct her, after the fashion of the other cavaliers. She just touched it with her finger-tips, which struck upon my warm palm cold as death, and we went out upon the terrace, down a flight of steps, and into a thick orange grove, where we were alone. Instantly she dropped my hand as if it burnt her, and, facing me, cried vehemently:

"Now, monsieur impostor, monsieur brigand, masquerading as a gentleman! Time is short, speak out. What is your will?"

For the second time that night I could only stammer foolishly; such an unexpected onslaught frightened my wits away.

"Speak out!" she repeated, stamping her little

foot. "Why have you sought me here? Is it for your reward?"

"My reward?" I echoed; words would not come to me yet.

"Ay, the reward I promised for your services; the gold you did not stay to receive. When the Governor sent for you you were gone. You have come to demand it now; is it not so, monsieur impostor, Jean the horse-boy?"

"I am no impostor; neither do I want your money. I would not take a crown of you if I were starving," I cried, finding my speech at last. "Neither did I come here to seek you. I did not know you were in Italy, much less in Ispari. I have never once heard your name since we parted."

"Then why come you hither at all?"

"In attendance upon my kinsman, Sir Paul Caryl."

"Your kinsman? What mean you?"

Then I recounted to her, in as few words as I could, the story of my birth, and how I had recovered name and friends. You may be sure I did not dilate upon it; her scornful reception had made me angry.

"You expect me to believe this fine tale?" she cried, mockingly, when I came to an end.

"It matters not to me whether you do or not," I retorted curtly. "You asked me a question and I answered it."

"Ah, I will find out the truth some other way. Not that it is anything to me," and she half turned to go; it was such a struggle with her pride to speak to me at all. Had I guessed what she wanted

I would have helped her; but I was thick-headed at the best, and always at my worst with the demoiselle. I could read her looks a great deal better than her words. She half left me, as I said, then, staying her steps, said harshly:

"Perhaps, now that you call yourself gentle born, your business is with my uncle?"

"I know nothing of your uncle."

"Oh yes, you do. You have already paid your court to him very successfully. The Grand Chamberlain is my uncle."

"I did not know. But 'tis naught to me; 'tis no business of mine."

"Surely it is not my brother you are seeking?" and her voice trembled.

"I am not seeking anyone," I returned impatiently—her persistence annoyed me—"most certainly not the Marquis de Suresne. What, pray, has he to do with me?"

"Would you try to persuade me you come as a friend?"

At last a light began to dawn upon my stupidity. It was the old fear again. She thought I had come to make some claim upon her. How, or in what fashion I could not tell, seeing that, in all probability, she was long ago married to her cousin.

"Neither as friend or foe; simply a stranger. I make your acquaintance, if you will so honour me, for the first time to-night. As far as I am concerned, I never spoke to you until yonder lady took me to your side. I never saw you before. I repeat, you are a stranger to me."

"And what will your new friend, your English kinsman, say to that?" she cried quickly.

"What should he say? Never, that I am aware of, has he heard your name; certainly not from me."

"You have not told him?" and she looked at me incredulously.

"I have not told even my confessor. The secret was not mine. I promised once never to speak of it, and, horse-boy or gentleman, I always keep my word. There was a paper once. I destroyed it long ago lest it should fall into other hands. With that all was at an end. Mademoiselle—pardon me if I do not address you by your right title——"

"I am Mademoiselle de Suresne still," with a ring of the old defiance.

"Then, Mademoiselle de Suresne, I have not seen the fountain of which we were speaking. Will it please you to show it to me now?"

She believed at last, I think, for she gave me her hand without a word, and we walked on until we came out upon the company. Afterwards I took the first opportunity that presented itself for leaving her, and spoke with the demoiselle no more that night.

One thing out of all this rather puzzled me. Why was mademoiselle so frightened? For in her manner, far more than in her words, even when she hit me hardest, there had been through all an undercurrent of deadly fear. It could not be merely lest I should betray the secret of that empty ceremony; she must have been compelled herself to acknowledge it in order to be set free. Besides, now that I was proved of noble birth, there was less humilia-

tion. That she was not free, that through pride and shame Mademoiselle de Suresne had held her tongue, compelling her brother to silence also, never once occurred to me. Yet so it was; though not for a long time did I know it. The demoiselle was still my wife; I might lay claim to her if I chose. She had thought never to see me again, least of all in a strange country. No wonder my sudden appearance startled the poor lady. It seemed impossible she could have kept the matter so secret, seeing she was promised in marriage to her cousin. But here again circumstances favoured her. For some unknown reason she took a great dislike to the gentleman, Count Ornano. The Duchess, to spite the Grand Chamberlain, upheld her, and the Count quitted Ispari in dudgeon. Another report had it that Count Ornano was not heart-broken at his rejection. If aught happened to the young Marquis, he might perchance obtain possession of the lands without the lady.

CHAPTER XXII.

I INTERFERE WITH MY LORD CHAMBERLAIN.

We remained at Ispari for some weeks, Marshal Lautrec being in no hurry to remove from such pleasant quarters. When at last he did move on we were left behind.

"'Tis the old story, Jean," said Sir Paul, when he told me the news. "One way or another, my lord means to be quit of us. There is more reason, however, this time, though he need not have picked me out for the service. The town needs holding with a strong hand. There are enemies within as well as without. It would never do for Ispari to be captured by the Imperialists. It is our duty, and we must obey; but 'tis an inglorious task. No chance of winning your spurs this time, Jean; no reward, no plunder. Once the danger is over I shall return to Calais. My Lord Marshal understands that; I have taken my leave of him."

When I heard this I did not know whether to be glad or sorry. I was vexed that my first campaign should come to such an inglorious end. At the same time I was glad of the opportunity to see more of the demoiselle. I was not anxious to talk with her. She did not treat me civilly enough for that.

But I liked well to watch her from a distance. Remember, I did not know she was still bound to me. Had I guessed it for a moment I should have acted differently, and kept out of her sight as much as possible.

The Grand Chamberlain was much opposed to having any troops left behind, and did all in his power to prevent it. That being the case, the Duchess favoured the project strongly; and Marshal Lautrec, only too glad of the opportunity to be rid of the man he detested, at once fell in with her wishes. Still, the Chamberlain did not show himself unfriendly to us; on the contrary, he accepted his defeat with good grace, and was more complaisant than ever. Sir Paul was courteous to him always, but very cold. He distrusted my lord with all his heart, and kept him ever at arm's length. This did not suit the gentleman at all. He suspected Sir Paul of being as double-faced as himself, and hoped to discover his plans. To help him in this he even set spies upon me; one of his agents being, strangely enough, the young Marquis of Suresne. The boy had shot up into a tall young stripling, weakly still, yet of somewhat swaggering demeanour, and affecting all the vices of a man. I pitied him somewhat for his sister's sake, and when he made advances of friendship I eagerly responded.

The young lord had a great idea of his own importance. He thought I was flattered by his notice, and always expected me to lose when we wagered or when we played with the cards. His usual name for me was Monsieur Englishman—Strathbourne, he was pleased to say, being too hard

to pronounce. Of course the lad had no idea he had ever seen me before—that I had ever played a part in his life. His agitation at the time had been so great I felt sure there was no danger of recognition. I do not think Mademoiselle de Suresne knew much of my intimacy with her brother. He thought me too insignificant to speak of, and when we were present together at the receptions of the Duchess, rather held aloof from me.

Those days passed very happily. It was my duty to wait upon the Duchess almost every evening, and always I saw the demoiselle. It was but seldom we spoke together. I never addressed her unless she spoke to me first; but sometimes she would throw me a passing word or two, and every syllable I treasured.

If Mademoiselle de Suresne were cold to me, however, other ladies were not—one in particular, a certain Contessa Motocaro, whose husband was absent with the French troops, was almost overpoweringly kind. She was handsome and witty, and speaking French almost as well as her own tongue, I liked her well enough, and felt grateful for her notice. But when, after the fashion of the court, she not only began to call me her young cavalier, but gave me her glove to wear in my helm, I drew back a little. I excused myself from this latter by reminding her that I was only a simple squire, that I must wait to win my spurs before I could tilt in honour of a lady; and when I thought no one was looking I cast her glove away in the palace gardens. It was a circumstance of not much moment. Why I mention it here is be-

cause it brought me a kind word from the demoiselle. She must have been watching me closer than I thought, for that same night she herself secretly gave the glove back to me.

"The Contessa must not know you prize her gift so lightly," she said, in a low voice. "She has powerful friends; it is dangerous to offend her."

"Am I to wear it in my helm as she bade me then?" I replied in simple fashion as if I knew no better.

"That is as you please, sir squire," my demoiselle returned with a kinder smile than she had ever given me yet. "But if you must needs lose it, let it be in some more private place, not where officious hands will take it back to her."

This little incident pleased me mightily; it showed, I thought, that the lady took some small interest in me. My hopes were soon dashed again. The next time we met, as if to make up for her short-lived kindness, Mademoiselle de Suresne was colder and haughtier than ever. Yet I did not care so much; it could not take away the fact that she had given herself the trouble to warn me.

Although most of my evenings were spent in idleness at the palace, I found plenty to do in the day. Should the tide of war flow in our direction the city would have to stand a siege, and Sir Paul was busy enlarging and strengthening the defence. Many rumours were flying about. One was that the French had been defeated, which we did not believe. Another, more probable, was that the *Bande Nere*, the Black Bands of the city of Florence, who had once followed Giovanni de Medici,

and now, under Orazio Baglioni, were to have joined Lautrec, had gone over in a body to the enemy. This, though it turned out not to be true, was likely enough. If the troops were not paid they were wont to change sides in a day, in an hour; and the commanders were always short of money.

Messengers were sent off at once, both to the marshal and to the city of Florence, and, whilst awaiting their return, news was brought of a band of men who had taken up their quarters in a ruined village a few leagues away. They might be an advanced post of the enemy, they might be but a handful of brigands—anyhow, it was necessary to find out and dislodge them. Sir Paul was very glad of the chance, for he had raised a body of troops from among the townspeople, and was anxious to try them in the field.

Amongst those who proposed to accompany us was the young Marquis de Suresne. Most of the gentlemen of Ispari, save those attached to the Duke's household, had gone to the field with my Lord of Lautrec; the Marquis had been thought too weakly, and, by his uncle's command, had remained behind. It was the Chamberlain's own wish, however, that the boy should ride with us now, and he himself was very eager—apparently he had overcome his childish cowardice.

We were quite a gay cavalcade when we started, the Duke and the Chamberlain mounting the walls to see us off, and the Duchess and her ladies riding with us part of the way. Mademoiselle de Suresne had not a word or a look for me, but I noticed her

in close converse with Sir Paul, and, in due time, I found out the reason. The ladies had long left us, and we were nearing our destination, when my cousin reined up his horse beside mine.

"Young Suresne is a friend of yours, Jean?" he asked.

"A friend of a sort," I replied. "He will drink with me when he has no one better, he will talk with me when his friends are not near, and he does me the honour at times to win my money."

"Ah, I see. I knew I had seen you together. I want you to give an eye to him now. Mademoiselle his sister is troubled with foolish fears concerning the lad, and has appealed to me to protect him. I shall have enough to do with seeing after these raw levies. I turn him over to you."

"Very good, I will do my best," I answered with a laugh, "so long as you do not send him to the rear."

I thought the matter of little consequence, knowing well the timidity of the demoiselle in aught concerning her brother.

It caused me, however, to turn my attention to the young Marquis, and I rode up and exchanged a few words with him. He received me rather coldly. He was talking and jesting with one of his boon companions, a certain Signor Vivares, a pestilent fellow I could not abide. My company was plainly not desired; so I fell back and left him to his own devices, contenting myself with throwing a glance his way now and then.

When we reached the village we found it to all appearance deserted, though traces were not want-

ing of recent occupation. Indeed, in one place the embers of a fire were still glowing. Orders were given for the buildings to be thoroughly searched, half the men dismounting, whilst the others spread themselves round to intercept any fugitives. This took some time, for the houses were straggling, and then it was I first realised the responsibility of the task I had so lightly undertaken. There was little probability of coming to open blows, but there was always the chance of a stray shot; if anything happened to the Marquis the demoiselle would never forgive me. True, she herself had not intrusted him to my protection, but Sir Paul had spoken for her; it was just the same. I would not go too near to be repulsed again; but I followed the lad stealthily, seeing a musket behind every bush.

After a time a few shots were heard. Some men had been discovered in an outlying barn and seemed inclined to defend it. The shed was quickly surrounded; then, as Sir Paul wished to capture them unhurt, in order to obtain information, he began to parley with them.

At the first rush the young Marquis and his friend had hurried up with the rest of us, but when the excitement was over, I saw Signor Vivares speak low into the boy's ear, and suddenly they turned and rode sharply away. Now that the village had been so thoroughly searched my fears were somewhat allayed. Still I thought it well to follow, keeping out of sight as much as I could. Besides, I was rather curious as to where they could possibly be going. They passed the farthest outpost,

and still rode on; then when they were safely beyond sight, two shots flashed forth from a roadside thicket. The horse of the Marquis fell to the ground, throwing him heavily. Signor Vivares, instead of endeavouring to aid his friend, galloped off at his utmost speed, without one glance behind. I was at some little distance, and before I could reach the helpless lad two ruffians darted forth, prepared to dispatch him. My pistols were loaded and ready to hand; I took careful aim, and the foremost fell upon his face. The other looked up, startled; then seeing me close upon him tried to make his escape. He had no chance—I was riding, he was on foot; I cut down the treacherous assassin without mercy. For assassination it was truly. From their dress the men belonged to our own troop, and it seemed to me as if Signor Vivares had planned it all.

When I got back to the Marquis I was rejoiced to find him sitting up and looking about him.

"Is it you?" he asked, in somewhat bewildered fashion. "What has become of Vivares?"

"He has gone to obtain help, perhaps; at least he made off as fast as his horse could carry him," I returned drily. "The knaves have hit you, I see," for blood was trickling down his sleeve; "let me find out what is amiss."

On examination the lad's hurts proved to be less than I feared. A ball had lodged in his shoulder; a very simple wound, I thought, and he was also bruised and shaken by his fall. He was a little faint and dizzy, but a draught from my flask soon revived him, and as I tied up his hurt I asked how

he came to ride in that particular direction. He did not answer at first; he was too busy turning things over in his mind—the boy did not lack understanding. Then taking no notice of my question, he asked instead:

"How came you to be here, Monsieur Englishman?"

"It chanced so," I answered carelessly. "I heard the shots and rode up."

"Did Vivares know you were behind?"

"That I dare swear he did not."

"Ah, you think——"

"I think I would not ride abroad with Signor Vivares again without other company. Now, monsieur, if you are able to move I will help you on to my horse; your own, I see, is dead. Our friends will be coming to look for us."

"Wait a moment; it is necessary that I should understand. I owe Vivares money; he would hardly—unless, ah, he would get more that way—could Edmée have been right, after all?" This last muttered as if to himself; then abruptly to me—"Turn him over, let me see his face," pointing to the dead ruffian a few paces away. "Is he quite dead? Go and see."

I turned the fellow's face upwards; he was dead enough; my bullet had pierced his heart. I was still examining the body, turning out the pockets to look for papers, when I found the Marquis standing by my side. He was whiter even than before, and his limbs were trembling.

"I know him," he whispered, as if afraid of being overheard, though not a creature was near.

"It is even as she said, fool that I was to have doubted." Then bursting into a queer little laugh, meant to hide his fright, "And it is you who have saved me—you!" and he laughed again. "Do you not know that he set me to watch you, to get out of you all I could?"

"He?—who? Signor Vivares?"

"Vivares? No, what should it advantage him? He is but an underling. It is my uncle, the Grand Chamberlain, who wishes me out of the way. I was warned that it might be so, but would not believe; I did not think he would dare. But I know this fellow well, 'tis a man he was wont to employ," and he spurned the body with his foot. "There is no longer any doubt."

"Why should your uncle desire your death?" I asked, loth to be convinced of such treachery, though a dim remembrance of certain words spoken by the brigand captain came back to me.

"For a very good reason—because he is my next heir. He has let me alone so far; I am not strong, and perhaps he thought I should save him the trouble. But there is a talk now of my returning to France—I am a French noble, I have to do homage for my estates, you know—I suppose that has quickened him. Once safe at the court of the King of France, I should be out of his power."

I helped the lad to my horse after this, and as I walked by his side I wondered rather if he meant to openly accuse his uncle, and, if so, what might be the outcome of it. The young Marquis was thinking of much the same, for presently he broke the silence with—

"Can you keep counsel, Monsieur Englishman?"

I laughed as I thought how little he knew. "I think so, monsieur; at least I can try."

"Then say nothing of what has happened, save that you found me wounded and lent me your horse. Leave me to tell the rest. Meet Vivares just as usual, as if you did not know; and above all be careful with my uncle. Do you think you can do that?"

"It does not sound very difficult."

"Ah, but there is the Contessa Motocaro."

"What of her? Is she also a spy of my Lord Chamberlain's?"

"Of course she is, and a very clever one, too. Miladi has drawn secrets from wiser men than you."

"But what do they think to get out of me?" I cried, surprised. "I know no secrets; I have nothing to hide."

"You, no," and his tone grew somewhat contemptuous; "but you are in the confidence of Sir Paul Caryl."

"You thought I could betray my kinsman?" and for the moment I turned hot with anger.

"You might betray him without knowing, though I never got anything out of you. The Contessa was more successful, I dare say."

I laughed again; it was not worth while being angry. "Let us hope so; let us hope she gave satisfaction to her employer."

"Do you really mean you never told her anything?"

"Do you ask as a gentleman, or as the spy of my Lord Chamberlain, Monsieur le Marquis?"

The lad flushed, and seemed for the first time a little ashamed.

"As a friend," he stammered. "I should like to be friends with you; if you will."

"Nay, as a friend, all I ever told the Contessa might have been proclaimed aloud upon the housetops, and no one a whit the wiser!"

"You are not so simple as you seem, then, after all," and he looked at me almost admiringly.

"Simple or not, monsieur, I know how to keep my own counsel. May I ask if Mademoiselle de Suresne knew you were set as a spy upon me?"

"My sister? What has it to do with her? I do not tell her everything; we do not always agree. She is not friends with my uncle, since she refused to marry his son. It was foolish of her; stupid, and so I told her. The marriage has long been arranged; there was no reason why she should not carry it out—no reason at all," and he frowned and shook his head as if to drive away some unwelcome recollection. "She talks of going into a convent when we return to France, but it is quite certain King Francis will never allow it. I always took my uncle's side before; now I must tell her of this, and she will find some way to circumvent him. That is why I wish the matter kept so secret; it will be easier if he thinks we do not know."

I had not believed for a moment that the demoiselle was in the conspiracy; nay, I even thought that had she known she would have warned me; still, it was satisfactory to hear it from the boy's own lips.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A REBUKE AND A RECONCILIATION.

I WAS obliged to tell Sir Paul the true story of what had happened, lest he should think I had been careless of his behest; also, it was my duty to warn him concerning the espial. He laughed at that.

"I always knew," he said. "It is the custom of the country, the way they carry on their affairs. As for the Marquis, 'tis a pity rather. The Chamberlain is not likely to fail twice. Still, it is no business of ours; as long as they keep their hands off us, let them stab and shoot one another as they will."

"I should be glad to save the lad if I could," I remarked; "if only to foil my Lord Chamberlain. I like not to have spies set upon me."

"I tell you, Jean, that is nothing; but if you mix yourself up in the boy's affairs, 'tis likely to prove more serious. I want not to hear one day you have been picked up in some dark corner with six inches of cold steel in your back. By the way, as what you have already done is sure to come to my lord's ears, it might be as well if you wore a good mail shirt underneath your doublet. See to

it. 'Tis better to take precautions before than after. As for the Marquis, his only course is to quit the city with all speed, to go where his uncle's arm cannot reach him. Give him that advice if you choose, and then have done with it."

It was more than a week after this before I met the young Marquis again. I saw the demoiselle once or twice at the palace, but she did not speak or take any notice of me, and, of course, I did not accost her. I listened to all that was said, but no one suspected, as far as I could tell, that the lad's hurt was out of the ordinary course of things. Some shots had been exchanged; two of the troopers were wounded also, there was nothing to be wondered at in a stray ball hitting the Marquis. Only the Contessa was very curious concerning my part in the affair, and questioned me closely. But forewarned was forearmed, and with the simplest air in the world I referred her to Signor Vivares. It was he who accompanied Monsieur le Marquis when the shot was fired; I only arrived in time to find the young gentleman disabled.

Then one morning, as I was returning from the guard-room, I was met by a servant, who said his master, the Marquis of Suresne, desired to speak with me. The message was rather peremptory, but that I knew was the boy's style; he always imagined the world was made for him.

Since his illness the young lord had been lodged in the palace—that, I knew; but I was rather surprised to find him quartered high up in the old tower. I remember the thought struck me as I was ascending the steep stairs, how remote he was

from all help; how, in case of danger, no cries could pierce that massive wall. Again, on the other hand, if surrounded by his own friends, no place could be so secure; and I noted with approbation how all the lackeys, even the sentinel on guard, wore the badge of the Suresnes. It was the demoiselle's doing, I felt certain; she had provided for her brother's safety.

The room into which I was conducted, though not very luxurious, was fairly comfortable. The bare stone walls were hidden by tapestry, there was a hanging lamp of wrought silver, a table and chairs, and in a deep recess, half concealed by faded curtains, was the bed.

The young Marquis, in a fine embroidered gown, was reclining in a low chair, his feet supported by a stool. He looked sorely ill. His pale cheeks were lined and drawn, his lips pinched, his hands thin and trembling. The lad must have been weakly indeed, for so light a hurt to have such effect upon him. My heart went out in pity. I forgot his arrogant selfishness, could pardon even the tone of lofty condescension with which he accosted me.

"I have sent for you, monsieur," my lord began directly we were alone, "because I think you may be of service to me."

I bowed and murmured something about being very happy, wondering rather what he wanted. Scarce to be one of his seconds in a duel with Vivares; he would not consider me of rank enough for that. "It has been shown me," he went on, "that it would be well if I quitted Ispari, if I set out for France as soon as I am able to travel.

Now my uncle I am sure will prevent this if he can, so needs must that I leave secretly. I told my sister how you helped me the other day, Monsieur Englishman, and she agreed with me you would be the one to aid us. I should require a proper escort, of course, and Edmée was sure you would be able to provide it. By the way, she will be here presently; she wishes to thank you for your pains the other day."

This was good news; it gratified me much that the demoiselle should trust me well enough to ask a service. Unfortunately, I was again doomed to disappointment. The Marquis was still talking, explaining his requirements, which seemed to me impossible to be carried out—nothing less than a whole troop of horse would have sufficed, when there came a low tapping from behind the wall.

"'Tis my sister," said the boy. "She comes unattended because the way is private. Few know of it; not even my uncle. 'Tis why she hath placed me here, that she may watch over me unknown. Enter, Edmée, there is none here, but Monsieur Englishman."

At once the arras was lifted, and Mademoiselle de Suresne entered through a hidden door near the recess. She was clad wholly in white, with long hanging sleeves adorned with fine silver work, and a silver girdle encircled her waist. I stood before her bareheaded and bowing low, expecting for once to receive gracious words from her. I was soon undeceived. Instead of graciousness, she regarded me with undisguised surprise, and scarce returning my

greeting, said haughtily, "You here, monsieur? I understood you did not seek my brother."

"Pardon, mademoiselle, I am not here by my own will. My lord the Marquis sent for me and I came."

"You sent for this gentleman?" and she turned to her brother.

"Certainly I did. Was it not settled so? Did you not say yourself that you wanted to see him?" the Marquis answered pettishly. "You were mightily set upon thanking him, and now you seem angry that he is here."

"But it was not this gentleman. You told me yourself it was the Englishman, Sir Caryl, who had aided you."

"Not Sir Caryl, but Monsieur Englishman—this one here—his name is too troublesome."

"It was Monsieur de Strathbourne who saved your life?"

"Who else? Though after all it was no such great matter, as monsieur would say for himself; it only happened that he was near at hand."

"But I would not have troubled Monsieur de Strathbourne for the world," she persisted. "It was —it was——" and she stopped short.

I guessed her dilemma; she did not wish her brother to know she had spoken to Sir Paul. So I broke in:

"The matter is very simple. It was in pursuance of certain orders received from Sir Paul Caryl, who was much occupied that day with the new levies, that I chanced to be passing when Monsieur le Marquis was so treacherously attacked. It was

sheer accident that the duty fell to me; I did but act as my cousin's deputy; I did not thrust myself forward, I assure you." Then drawing myself up proudly, for her manner had wounded me sore: "It is not well of you, Mademoiselle de Suresne, to treat me with such distrust; never in my life have I done aught to deserve it. If my poor services can be of use, why not accept them as any other lady would? 'Tis wronging me cruelly to think I should presume."

The demoiselle flushed red at my rebuke, for rebuke indeed it was, and stood with her eyes cast down, biting her lips angrily. I thought I had done for myself for good and all, yet was I vexed enough to be glad I had spoken. The struggle did not last long; my lady's natural graciousness suddenly overcame her pride, and she turned to me, saying:

"Monsieur, your reproach is just; though 'tis because we owe you so much already I was reluctant to increase the debt. Yet, if it is of your own free will, if it is indeed your good pleasure to have it so, then, monsieur, I crave your pardon for the past, and beg of you to help us."

And so, with eyes swimming in tears, she held out her hand. I sank on my knees as I raised it to my lips, stammering I knew not what. I could not speak. I was so ashamed to have caused her such distress, I could not even ask her pardon. Yet sure am I that she understood; that at last she read me rightly. She never doubted me again; from that hour there was peace between us.

The Marquis, who had been looking on amazed, now interposed impatiently.

"Edmée, perhaps you will explain. It is news to me that we already owe much to Monsieur Englishman. I cannot understand what you mean at all—I say I cannot understand it." The young gentleman was fast becoming angry.

"Mademoiselle de Suresne takes too exaggerated a view of the poor service I was able to render my lord the other day," I answered quickly. "It is because the life of Monsieur le Marquis is so precious to her. But by your leave, we will allow it to drop now, and speak only of the matter in hand." Thus I easily diverted his attention, and we fell to discussing plans for his escape.

My lord was exceedingly anxious to leave Ispari. He had a well-founded knowledge of his own danger; yet remembering, perhaps, what had happened to him before, his demands were rather extravagant. He seemed to think he must be escorted across the mountains by half the garrison, and I was to command them in person. I was an honest sort of fellow, he was pleased to say, one whom he could trust to defend him. When he arrived in France his rank would give him the ear of the King; he would take care I lost nothing by serving him.

I looked at the demoiselle in dismay, since such an escort was, of course, impossible. Unseen by him she made me a sign not to refuse. It was no use saying much, for the lad was too fretful to be contradicted. I simply explained I had no authority myself to give the necessary orders. I must consult my kinsman, Sir Paul Caryl. There was no doubt but that he would arrange it. Soon after this Mademoiselle de Suresne took her leave, and as I

lifted the arras for her to pass out, she whispered softly:

"Leave him to me; I will talk him over. Truly he must fly in secret or he will be stayed on the way. I trust that to you. So that he escapes safely across the frontier, it matters not with whom." She had time for no more; the Marquis looked up suspiciously. But we understood one another, it was enough.

CHAPTER XXIV.

PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT.

As soon as I was free I hastened to seek Sir Paul at his lodgings. I did not mean to let the grass grow under my feet. To my surprise, I found him closeted with the Grand Chamberlain, with strict orders that he was not to be interrupted. They were together for the space of an hour or more, and I guessed in vain what might be brewing. Even after the Chamberlain had gone and Sir Paul sent for me to his presence, he was so deep in thought it was some time before he seemed to perceive me. At last, with the air of a man who has solved some knotty point, my cousin looked up and greeted me warmly:

"Ah, Jean, you are just the man I want. With your help I think I shall baffle them yet. Jean, know you that my Lord Chamberlain has been with me this hour past?"

"So they told me but now," I returned, "when I sought you on an errand of my own. I trust my lord hath no complaint against us?"

"Nay, he brings great news. A troop of Spaniards, under Huelva, are on their way to attack Lautrec in the rear. There is no doubt, my lord

says, and from reports he placed before me his information seems sure. They will not turn aside to touch us; they are making forced marches hoping to fall upon the Marshal before their presence is known. They are keeping to the by-ways the better to conceal their movements, but they must cross St. Michael's pass; if we laid in ambush there, instead of surprising they would be surprised, and we should have them at our mercy."

"That is good news, indeed!" I cried, wondering why Sir Paul looked so grave over it. "That is," I added quickly, "if it be true."

"There is so much truth in the matter that I must go. I have questioned his messengers myself, and my own spies in part confirm them. I have been stationed here not only to hold the city but also to sustain the main army—I should be dishonoured if the enemy crept by—and yet, Jean," and he paused, looking round warily—"Come nearer, lad, bend your head close to mine, every wall in this place has ears—and yet what if it be all a ruse, a deep-laid plot to get me out of the way? I had my doubts from the beginning, though 'tis all put together very plausibly. Since my Lord Chamberlain hath been with me I doubt him more than ever."

"You think he means to betray you into the hands of the enemy?"

"That was my idea at first; since our conference I have changed my mind and fear something within the city may be intended. For one thing he is very earnest that I should take all the best troops. His arguments are unanswerable. The new levies,

as you know, are of little use in the field, though they might fight well on the walls. They would serve to guard the city, my lord says. Maybe, but I doubt much their fidelity to the Duke, I do not trust them one whit. Their officers are of the Chamberlain's party to a man; if anything is on foot, they are in it; it hath been arranged among them. But I have no proof; my lord is too clever for me. I can find out nothing."

"Then why go?" I asked bluntly. "Why not send one of us instead?"

"Nay, that is impossible, for if Huelva, indeed, be at hand, they might say I had skulked behind walls to avoid him. I cannot refuse to do my duty because I suspect I know not what, for after all it may turn out to be nothing. I have to make sure on both sides, and was puzzled at first how to play against them. I think, with your help, I have made it out now. My Lord Chamberlain rides with us. He proposed it himself, guessing surely I would not leave him behind, and of course he takes for granted that you accompany us. I did not undeceive him; on the contrary, I took trouble to confirm his impression, but Jean—keep your head closer, man—you must stay here."

I started at this; yet a moment's thought, and it pleased me well. If absent in the field how could I help the demoiselle? It was vexing to lose the chance of battle, yet would it have grieved me more to fail my lady in her hour of need.

"I shall put you in command of the palace guard," Sir Paul went on; "if aught should be attempted against the Duke, remember you hold

my honour in your hand, defend him to the death. You will make all preparation as if you were going, you will not breathe a word even to your dearest friend; but at the very last moment, when my lord will have no time to change his plans, I shall command you to stay behind. Have ready a score or so of picked men—our Englishmen for preference—you may take them all an you will."

"And Bouquet?" I interrupted; I had a great liking for the brave Swiss.

"Bouquet; by all means, if he pleases you, though I fancy he is rather simple. However, you can trust him, and that is the chief thing. Keep them together; there will be no time for choosing when the hour comes, for not until we are actually on the march shall I give the order."

"And what about Count Vanharten?" It was he who had hitherto commanded the palace garrison.

"Vanharten is devoted to my Lord Chamberlain. If all were as it seems he would have come with us—he is too good a soldier to neglect a chance of battle. 'Tis just because he chooses to remain I put you over him. If he be an honest man he will resent the slight, if he takes it quietly, beware. Do you wear that mail shirt I advised?"

"Not yet, I like better to depend upon my good sword. Still, if you wish it."

"I do not wish now; I command it. I know the need better than you. I will speak myself to the armourer. You must be all eyes and ears, Jean; for if aught happened to the Duke no excuse would avail. I should be a dishonoured man. One more

word and I have done. You know the Church of St. Gudule? You can see the tower from the palace windows."

"I know it well."

"Good. If you find you need help—if it be by day, wave a white cloth, if by night, a torch, a candle from the sconce. They are sure to close the gates first thing; they will not let you send a messenger. Wave it until you see the signal repeated from the church tower, then wave thrice again, and help will be with you in a few hours. I mean to drop Bertelin with fifty men at Hendelet. I dare not leave him nearer, for if my fears are without foundation I may have need of them myself."

"But if the gates are closed, how will they be able to enter?"

"Leave that to me, Jean. I am learning how to fight my friends with their own weapons. And now I think I have arranged for all; it will be best we do not talk privately together again. Stay, though; you sought me for some purpose of your own. What can I do for you?"

I was loth to trouble Sir Paul when he was so full of serious concern, but there was no help for it, and I told him how I had engaged myself to aid the Marquis. Not a word about the demoiselle's intervention, however; I spoke only of her brother. Sir Paul dismissed the matter in very few words, though he said first:

"I marvel, Jean, that you trouble yourself about the lad; has he not friends of his own? Still if you have given your word"—and he shrugged his

shoulders as if he thought me very foolish—"best wait, if you can, until I return. I should not think the danger pressing now that my Lord Chamberlain hath other work on hand. Should the lad think otherwise, and he ought to know best, you might pass him out as one of the troopers carrying my French dispatch. 'Tis time it went, though I had meant to wait until this was over. You may send it off an you will, but remember you can spare no extra men; Aubin and a couple of troopers, as usual, no more."

I spoke with Mademoiselle de Suresne that same night, and when she heard the Chamberlain was to accompany the expedition she consented to wait.

"I must," she said, a little impatiently. "You depart in two days, you say, and Louis will scarce be able to travel for a week. You give me little choice. It is not your fault; do not think I am blaming you," she added more graciously. "My fears for my brother oft make me unreasonable. I doubt not all will go well for the time. I shall look forward to your return."

For I obeyed orders. Although I knew it would have made her feel more secure, I breathed not the slightest hint that I was remaining.

All went exactly as Sir Paul had arranged it. The troops marched through the square on their way, the Duke and Duchess, and their attendants, coming out into the balcony over the great gate to see us pass by. Sir Paul and the Grand Chamberlain rode at the head; but when they reached the gate Sir Paul turned off, and, halting beneath the balcony, spoke for a while with the Duke. Presently

I was summoned, and hastily invested with command of the palace guard, subject only to the Duke himself. Directly the Chamberlain found out what was going on, he hurried up to remonstrate, but it was too late.

"A small matter, my lord," said Sir Paul, speaking in careless fashion as of a thing indifferent. "As the Marshal Lautrec left me responsible for the Duke's safety I thought it might be well to augment his guard. 'Tis but a handful, as you see"—the men were now marching in—"we can well spare them."

"It is not the men but the captain," cried the Chamberlain hotly. "It is an insult to Count Vanharten to put a young squire over him."

"Nay, that is easily altered. Let Vanharten ride with us. If all you have told me be true, we may be glad of his experience."

A look, at least I fancied so, passed between the two men; then Vanharten, who was standing by, said, with a half smile:

"Pardon, monsieur, but I think my duty is here. If the safety of my master the Duke be in question, it would ill become me to leave his side. For the rest, if his Highness will it so, I am content for a time to serve with Monsieur de Strathbourne. We are good friends; we shall not quarrel."

If Vanharten expected the Duke to interfere he was disappointed. That his Highness was ill-pleased was evident, he looked black as thunder; but he took no part in the dispute; he left all to my Lord Chamberlain.

"Since the Count is content it suffices," said that

gentleman sulkily, "though it would have been more courteous had you given him notice. I follow you, monsieur," and he waited for my kinsman to precede him. But Sir Paul did not budge. He was resolved there should be no last words.

"Nay, after you, my lord," he returned, bowing to his saddle bow, and after yet another ineffectual attempt the Chamberlain was fain to ride on.

All this occupied but a very few minutes. The last of the troops had scarce passed out of the square when my men were seeking their quarters, and I was standing, cap in hand, before the Duke and Duchess. By the former I was received somewhat indifferently. For affairs of State he cared not one jot, but Vanharten was a favourite boon companion, he could drink with him cup for cup. Thus it was with a haughtiness he did not often assume he turned to me now with:

"It is a new thing for command of my guard to be given to a beardless stranger. Sir Paul Caryl sometimes forgets, I fancy, that he is not Duke of Ispari. I should like to know what commands you have received, Sir Englishman?"

"None, save to defend your Highness's person with my life," I returned, somewhat abashed by the Duke's severity.

"I have yet to learn that it is in danger."

"Monsieur, in these troublous times you are always in danger," interposed the Duchess. "And if Monsieur de Strathbourne be young, remember he hath already proved himself; it was he who captured the citadel. For my part I am grateful to Sir Caryl for this mark of his care."

"So am not I; I like not to be served by another man's esquire. Since you approve of the young man, keep him to yourself; I want not his protection. Vanharten is good enough for me. Come, Count, I am athirst, we will drink a cup together," and, leaning on his favourite's shoulder, he rolled from the room.

The Duchess watched his departure anxiously. Strange as it may seem, she loved her husband—this toper, this wine-cask—she loved him tenderly. The youth of the Duchess had been stormy, she had reason to be grateful to her lord, and now in his decadence she remembered it. She turned to me very graciously.

"Captain de Strathbourne, I accept your protection and will order apartments to be assigned you near my own. For the rest, I trust you will not fail to report to me. Should need arise, at any hour, day or night, you will find me ready to receive you."

I saw well what she meant. In case of danger I was to consult with her, not her husband; we were to work together to watch over him.

CHAPTER XXV.

ON GUARD.

Two days later the Duchess honoured me with another mark of her confidence, choosing—oh, good Duchess!—Mademoiselle de Suresne to convey her wishes to me. Of course 'twas sheer accident, she guessed nothing, she did but employ the demoiselle because she could trust her. It was in the evening, when I attended, as was my duty, in the presence chamber of the Duchess. The Contessa was laughing and jesting with me, doing her best all the time to turn me inside out, when her mistress suddenly summoned her to take part in a game with the cards. Scarce had she left me when the demoiselle glided into her place, a small jewelled figure in her hand.

"Monsieur," she said, smiling, "would it please you to admire this puppet presented to her Highness this morning. You pull the cord and the limbs move, see—it salutes, it presents arms, 'tis really a masterpiece of ingenuity." And whilst we were pulling the silken string, and admiring the toy together, she whispered, quickly: "Monsieur, the Duchess wishes you to know she has received information that Count Ornano has returned to Ispari in disguise."

"The Count Ornano? I have heard of him; son to the Lord Chamberlain, if I mistake not," I returned in the same tone, dancing the puppet that all might see it.

"The same; and as there is no reason why he should not show himself openly, my mistress fears all may not be well. She prays you be doubly on your guard. Nay, monsieur," with a sudden change of voice, "you must not keep my pretty puppet all to yourself. Here is Signor Otger, he has not seen it yet," turning to a handsome youth, one of the court pages, who had approached us rather closely.

The demoiselle gave all her attention to the boy, and presently I moved away, considerably perplexed by so much mystery.

Had I known exactly what to guard against, where the danger was to come from, my task would have been easier. As it was, it seemed like fighting the air. I could do nothing but keep ever on the watch, and trust only to my own vigilance.

With this object in view, though I kept the main body of my Englishmen together, giving Bouquet entire charge of the great gate, I mingled a few of the most intelligent of them amongst the rest of the garrison. By this means I hoped to discover any attempts at treachery. They had strict orders to report to me anything suspicious. I kept the gates always closed. No one was allowed to enter without stating their business. And after sundown, save those who lived in the palace and knew the password, no one could come in at all. Altogether, as Count Vanharten said, laughing (he ridiculed the idea of any particular danger), I put the palace into

a state of siege, adding, with a sneer at my inexperience, "'Twas the way with young soldiers, they always sought to magnify their command."

This was in the morning; later, at the dinner table, he jeered at me before them all, asking if he should get up a sham attack that I might do doughty deeds, and win my spurs of knighthood. I laughed and took his banter in good part, but held on my way nevertheless, as he found out for himself next evening. Whether he acted as he did on purpose to try me I know not, but think it very likely.

Count Vanharten went out in the town, and, returning with some friends after the gates were closed, he was allowed to pass, but his companions were denied admittance. The Count did not know the pass-word; it had been set after he had left, and it was in vain he raged and stormed; Bouquet held fast by my orders. I was sent for, but before I could arrive the gentlemen had departed. Yet was not Vanharten incensed with me, as I expected. Violent as he had been with Bouquet, when I came upon the scene he turned it off with a jest, vowing it was his own fault for not having inquired the word.

Such smoothness made me more doubtful than ever, and I redoubled my watchfulness accordingly. I took what sleep I needed in the day, and at night, after I had made my last round and ostensibly retired to rest, I would sally forth, with a townsman's long cloak concealing my armour, and walk for awhile about the city. I had reports brought me morning and evening, and always at least once

a day I rode through the streets. But supposing a night attack to be contemplated, there must first be an assemblage of men; and if I were on the spot I should see something of it. There were so few in whom I could put trust. When I saw with my own eyes that all was quiet I felt more satisfied. Old Aubin generally accompanied me on these expeditions, but, save Bouquet and the guard, who let me in and out, no one else had a suspicion of it. Truly I did all I could; I spared neither time nor trouble, yet did all my vigilance nearly come to naught. I was a novice in this kind of warfare; directed by a master hand the enemy were too subtle for me.

How it came about was in this wise:

It was the fifth day from Sir Paul's departure. In five more days, if all went well, he was expected back again, and the town still remained so quiet I began to flatter myself my precautions had averted the anticipated danger. The afternoon had been dull and overcast, with signs of a storm to come, and the Duchess, complaining of pains in her head, had retired early. The palace was closed for the night and the guard set before ten; only in the Duke's private apartments were lights still burning. About half an hour later I was waiting on the terrace for Aubin to accompany me into the town. I meant to make but a short round, for, although the threatened storm had passed off, the rain was falling in good earnest. It was hardly a night I thought for rebellious townsmen to be abroad; they would scarce be able to keep their powder dry. As I stood waiting, so secure did I feel, I even hummed

a tune under my breath, a song the demoiselle had sung to her lute the night before. Suddenly one touched me upon the shoulder, and I turned to confront Mademoiselle de Suresne herself. She had a cloak wrapped around her, but the hood had fallen back, and the rain beat upon her uncovered head.

"Ah, I knew it was you!" she cried breathlessly, and the ring of relief in her tone was unmistakable. "Monsieur Jean"—she had not styled me thus since we were alone upon the mountains—"I fear my brother is in danger; I pray you come with me quickly."

I turned my steps towards the tower upon the instant, but she checked me with:

"Not that way, they may hinder your entrance; there will be delay. Come with me, I will explain as we go along." And crossing the terrace she made for one of the long windows belonging to the presence chambers, which opened beneath her touch. "I unfastened it myself," she whispered, seeing my look of surprise. "I felt sure it was you upon the terrace, and I desired not to pass the guard."

It was very dark inside, and I had scarce taken three steps when I fell over a footstool, nearly measuring my length upon the ground.

"Take my hand," she muttered impatiently. "It is not dark to me; I know the way so well."

And with my hand in hers she glided along by the wall until she reached the far end behind the daïs. Here she stooped for a moment. There was a slight grating sound as if a panel had been pushed aside, and then a rush of cold, damp air.

"'Tis a private way to the tower, monsieur. I will go first—there is space only for one—and do you follow closely. If you keep your hand to the wall it will guide you. I left my lamp behind, or it would be easier."

There was a steep flight of steps, leading down, as it seemed, into the bowels of the earth, then a low, vaulted passage—I could feel the roof when I raised my hand—which must have run underneath the courtyard. As we hurried along, I following close at the demoiselle's heels, she acquainted me in short, breathless gasps with the reason of her alarm.

"I was sitting with Louis—I go to him every night after the Duchess has dismissed me—when the door opened and there was a tall man in a black mask. Upon perceiving me he seemed as startled as I was and disappeared instantly. Louis did not see him, for he had his back to the door; neither did Grimadell, my brother's old servant, who was also present. I was too alarmed to say a word at first, and before I could think what to do, a servant came with a message—Monsieur Otger was waiting for me below. The Duchess was ill and required my presence instantly. I did not believe, and demanded that Monsieur Otger should come up to me. Then another message was brought—Monsieur Otger might not enter the tower; Captain de Strathbourne had given orders, they dared not disobey. When I heard your name I felt it might be true and hurried down to see, first giving strict orders to Grimadell that on no pretext was he to leave his master for a single instant. I told

him to bar the door behind me and let no one in at all."

"And was Otger there?" I cried, as she paused for breath.

"No, no, there was no sign of him. They said he was unable to wait. He had to summon the leech, but he had left two men to escort me, and I was to hasten. I dared not refuse to go. I was alone, I had not even my woman, and when I looked around the faces were all strange. Our own servants had been replaced by others; I did not know one of them. They hurried me back to the palace, where I hoped the sentinel would send for you before admitting me. But no, the man knew me; he let me pass without question. I flew to the Duchess; she was asleep. I rushed back again to seek for you. Had I not found you on the terrace I must have roused the guard, but 'tis better a thousandfold as it is. If it be but a false alarm you will keep my counsel. Yet why should that masked man be there, and why should they send me away? If aught is amiss we shall be in time, I think. They would have to kill Grimadell before they could touch his master."

And all the while she was speaking, notwithstanding it was pitch dark, she did not slacken her steps for one instant, but hurried on so fast I had much ado to keep up with her and at the same time catch her words.

"We are beneath the tower now," she said presently. "Take care, there are steps that go down into the dungeons. We must upwards again. Give me your hand until we are past the danger."

I could see nothing. The darkness was thicker than ever, and I wondered at the demoiselle's courage and readiness. She drew me round a corner, and we ascended a steep, narrow stair winding round inside the wall. At last there came a faint flicker of light, and the lamp she had left burning upon a ledge revealed a low doorway.

"It is here," the demoiselle whispered, and I saw for the first time how blanched she was with fear.

"Then let me go first," I rejoined under my breath. "You have brought me hither. It is my business now. Do you wait outside until I call?"

But she caught me by the arm.

"Now, our Lady forgive me! but I never once thought of you. I know not even if you are armed."

I smiled, as, dropping my cloak to the ground, I pointed to sword and dagger.

"Armed at all points, you see, mademoiselle, and besides, I wear a coat of mail. Hist! what is that?" as a gurgling, choking sound came to our ears, and, pushing open the door, I softly entered.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE ASSASSIN OF THE TOWER.

It was a strange sight that met my eyes when I lifted the arras. The young Marquis was on the ground, black in the face, almost at his last gasp, beneath the grasp of a man who, with both hands around the lad's throat, was doing his utmost to strangle him. A little distance beyond, in a blood-stained pool slowly widening around, was stretched the body of the faithful servant. Beyond him again, calmly wiping his dagger ere he sheathed it, stood a tall man in a black mask.

I did not waste much time in looking on. Making for the wretch who was strangling the Marquis, I dragged him from his victim by main force, and, before he knew what was happening, I had hurled him from me, so that his skull cracked like an egg-shell against the stone wall. The masked assassin was just as quick. Before I had time to turn, he leapt upon me, plunging his dagger into my back. My good mail coat now served me well, the point glanced aside; I was unharmed. Seeing this, he had his sword out in a trice, and we fell to with a will. My unknown adversary fought after the Ital-

ian fashion, with sword and dagger both, one in each hand, a mode in which I was not expert. Neither of us spoke a word, only the clashing of the sword-blades, and the heavy stertorous breathing of Monsieur le Marquis, broke the silence. Even this latter ceased at length, and I feared the boy was dead.

But I dared not look round, my enemy pressed me so hard I could not take my eyes from him for a moment.

I soon found that my antagonist was much the better swordsman, and had he only been as cool as he was skilful, I should have had no chance. But I had startled him somewhat, appearing so suddenly, he knew not from whence, and this gave me a slight advantage. Still I had as much as ever I could do to hold my own; instead of pressing him I had to defend myself. At last by great good fortune, I pierced him slightly in the shoulder. This made him furious. He jumped forwards with a sudden bound, meaning to drive his dagger home, when, dropping my sword, I caught his arm. We struggled together, swaying this way and that, and I stepped in the blood of the murdered servant; my foot slipped, I fell on one knee, and he bore me to the ground. There was a piercing cry from Mademoiselle de Suresne—I had not known she was there—his dagger flashed before my eyes, and I struck at him impotently with clenched fist. He laughed aloud, raised his dagger again, then, as I tried to mutter a prayer, feeling sure my last hour had come, the sharp blade glanced aside, he fell forwards, gave one shudder and was still. Looking up to see who

was my deliverer, to my astonishment I found it to be the young Marquis. He had stabbed my antagonist in the back.

"I—I thought you were dying or dead," I gasped, as I struggled to my feet.

"Not quite; you arrived in the very nick of time. Yet was I no nearer the end than you just now. Methinks we can cry quits. I knew exactly where to plant my blow; the caitiff himself taught me. He said it never failed, and he was right, you see."

"You know him, then?"

"Ay, that do I, 'twas that gave me strength to come to your assistance; I owed him for the last time as well. Know him, yes, 'tis my uncle's dear friend Vivares," and, stooping, he tore the mask from the dead man's face.

It was Vivares, indeed, his eyes staring wide open, his features distorted hideously. It was a gruesome sight, and I covered his face hastily, just as the demoiselle came to my side.

"Monsieur, you are hurt," she cried. "It is necessary, before all things, that your wounds should be attended to."

I raised my hand, and found I was bleeding from a wound in the neck; his dagger had grazed me as he fell.

"Nay, 'tis but a scratch, mademoiselle," I answered. "Thanks to your brother, I have escaped scot free."

Yet would she not be content until she had bound my hurt with her own kerchief, whilst the Marquis looked on with scant patience.

"'Tis but a scratch, Edmée, as he says," he cried irritably. "My hurts are worse than his. I still bear the marks of that villain's fingers."

"Ah, what has become of him; has he escaped?" I said. In the excitement of the combat I had almost forgotten there was another.

"Escaped, no, there he lies in yon corner. Whether any life is left in him I know not; still, to make sure . . . ." and before I could stay him the Marquis drove his still reeking dagger into the unconscious man. It was almost as if he were proud of his skill, and glad of an opportunity to display it.

"Nay," he said, in answer to my cry of remonstrance, "he must not live to tell tales. But half your work is accomplished yet, Monsieur Englishman. You have to get me away. I must be on the road before this is discovered, or they will not fail again. Not all of those below will be in the secret; if we bar the door and leave by the private way it may give us a few hours. Come, sir, help me to secure the door in the outer room," and the boy, so lately almost at his last gasp, now took the lead in a way that half astonished, half amused me. It never occurred to him to ask if I could carry out his wishes; he thought he had but to signify his will and it must be done.

When we came in again from the other room the demoiselle was praying beside the servant who had given his life for his master. It was the only requiem the poor man had, for the Marquis never gave him a second thought. She rose as we entered and looked at me questioningly; she was not quite so

confident as her brother. Happily, thanks to Sir Paul, I thought I saw my way to arrange the matter. Still, it was necessary for the boy to understand, and I spoke very decidedly.

"It may be as well for Monsieur le Marquis to know that if he quits Ispari to-night he must forget his rank and travel as a common trooper. I have the power to send dispatches to France at any hour; he must leave disguised as one of the messengers. In that way only can I be answerable for his safety."

"So I go; I care not if it be as a beggar," he answered quickly. "I am not rid of the fellow's clutch yet," and his hand went up to his throat.

"Good, we will lose no time then; it would be well if you were on the way at once."

We left the three dead men to watch one another, and taking the candle from the sconce to light us—there was no need to travel in the dark now—we made our way to the panel door. I extinguished the light here, lest we should be seen, and moved a little aside whilst mademoiselle said farewell to her brother. This did not take very long; he was too impatient to be gone. Then the demoiselle retreated to her own apartments, and we went out through the window to the guard-house. There were only my men here, and I could trust them to hold their tongues. Bouquet soon found a dress for the Marquis, though 'twas somewhat large for his slender figure, and, taking old Aubin aside, I explained to him what I wanted.

"I cannot leave my post myself," I said. "I

must e'en trust him to you. Remember, 'tis all the world to me that he reach France in safety. I may only send two with you; the usual escort, such is Sir Paul's command, but you may choose whom you will. After all it may be safer, since a larger number might excite suspicion. Treat the young gentleman with all consideration, but pay no attention to his whims; at times he is apt to be petulant. 'Tis you I place in command mind; think only of his safety."

"I understand," returned the old fellow stoutly. "Give me Jervis and Dickon, and 'tis hard if we cannot hold in a boy. I will look after him, Captain Jean, as if he were yourself; more I cannot say."

Then we arranged about the route, and the rate of travelling, and how they should let me know when they had arrived safely. All this did not take so long as you might think, old Aubin being well accustomed to set off on long journeys at short notice. The horses were brought forth, the side-gate opened, and they rode out into the quiet city. They went through the streets at a slow pace not to excite remark, and, by taking a short cut on foot, I arrived at the gates almost as soon as they did. I wanted to see them safely out, but not to show myself unless necessary. Old Aubin and Jervis rode in front, the young Marquis, his steel cap well over his face, following with the other trooper. There was some little parley before they were allowed to pass. Aubin had a written permit signed by me, there ought not to have been the slightest trouble; yet the guard questioned him closely. When had

he the dispatches, and what made him ride so late? Then Aubin bent forward with a hiccough as if half intoxicated, and muttered thickly in his barbarous Italian:

"'Tis all the fault of your good wine, captain. I ought to have set out before sundown; but I had so many parting cups to empty, I went to sleep instead. Let me out speedily I pray you, lest it come to my captain's ears."

Still they hesitated, and I crept closer, sheltering myself behind a gatepost.

"It must be right," I heard one say to the other; "the English are always drunken."

"He said none were to go out," returned another voice; "not a man was to pass after midnight."

"And it is not midnight by an hour, fool. No one knows anything yet; if we stop them it may give the alarm. Pass on, friend, you will escape your captain's wrath to-night," adding, as Aubin and his party quickly clattered out of hearing, "Ay, and all other nights, too, if all go well. Think you——" and here they turned into the gate-house out of the rain, and I could hear no more. I had heard enough, however, to alarm me not a little. Who was this mysterious he, whose orders were to override mine? What was to begin at midnight? Could anything be happening at the palace and I not there? And with that I caught my sword by the scabbard that it might not impede my steps, and set to and ran with all my might. I had to slacken my speed somewhat on nearing the centre of the town, for—another strange thing—inclement

as was the night, many men were abroad, all hurrying in the same direction. I dare not question them lest my speech should betray me; besides, I now knew enough—mischief was on foot, that was certain. All I wanted was to get before them to the palace. With this object in view I was turning down a side street, when someone tapped me smartly on the shoulder. I started, but made no sign; only drew my cloak closer about my face, and held my sword in readiness.

"Not that way," said the man, who also was cloaked and hooded, but looked like one of the citizens. "Know you not that the place of assembly hath been changed? 'Tis in the market, not in the square; we shall be under shelter then until all is ready."

I muttered something through my cloak and walked on by his side. The market-place was in my way, 'twould be easier to escape after. He babbled on as if liking to hear himself talk.

"Many of us marvelled it was not put off altogether when the night turned out so ill, but he would not have it so, he said 'twould be all the better for our purpose. Besides, he hath a ruse, they say, that will make our task easy, though in truth I know not what it is. Perhaps you are better informed?"

I shook my head.

"No? Ah, well, he tells not his plans to all, but 'tis something to rid us of the Englishmen. The others are ours as you know; we shall have a new Duke before morning."

Here we turned into the market-place, which

was more than half full of armed men, and, taking advantage of an overturned stall, I glided behind it and dived down the first alley that presented itself. There was nobody about here, so I took to my heels again, and did not cease running until I came out upon the square before the palace.

CHAPTER XXVII.

FOUL TREASON.

THE rain fell, the wind blew, but—praise be to Heaven—the square was empty. All seemed safe as yet, and, with a long sigh of relief, I made for the nearest gate. I could see no sentry pacing within as there should have been, and, thinking they were skulking from the weather, I shouted for admittance. No one answered. I put my hand on the gate. It was unfastened and gave way beneath my touch. I rushed in. The guard-house was empty save two or three of the English I had placed amongst the garrison, and they were snoring on the ground like pigs. I kicked them with all my force, but they never moved; almost it seemed as if they had been drugged. I ran out again, the keys of the gate were gone, but there were some bars and bolts, which I shot into place fast as I could. Black treachery had been at work, that was clear. I wondered what I should find waiting for me farther on.

It was a vast relief when, as the great entrance came in sight, I saw the sentries on duty pacing to and fro, one before the gate, the other before the guard-house. The latter I dispatched instantly to the farther gate—there were three you may remem-

ber—with orders to return and report to me upon what he found there, whilst I went within to alarm Bouquet. What was my horror to find the Swiss sitting before the table, his head upon his arms, fast asleep; and lying around were the rest of the guard, senseless like those I had left behind me. I uttered a cry of despair. Were all the men like this I was helpless indeed! Catching Bouquet by the shoulder, I kicked and buffeted him without mercy, until at last he half opened his eyes. Seeing who it was thus assaulting him, he tried to stagger to his feet.

"Man, man, have you also betrayed me!" I cried bitterly. "What is it you have been drinking?"

"Nothing but the wine you sent yourself, captain," he answered huskily. "A few bottles from the Duke's table to keep out the wet."

"That I sent, rascal? When did you ever know me give wine to men on duty? Look, look around" —and I kicked the nearest hog.

Bouquet seemed by this time to become aware that something was amiss. He took a few steps, staggered, then making for a bucket of water, plunged his head in until I thought he would be suffocated. When at last he raised his dripping visage he was more himself:

"My captain, I give you my word I am not drunk, there is some cursed treachery here. I have tasted nothing save one draught of wine when I clinked glasses with monsieur your friend."

"My friend! What friend? Who was it?"

"I know not his name, he was a stranger to me.

A young man, somewhat older than yourself, with peaked beard, Spanish fashion. He was dressed in blue velvet like a court gentleman, and halted on one leg. He said he came straight from the Duke's table——"

"He came from within, not from without?" I interrupted.

"Surely, captain, or I should have challenged him. A servant was at his back carrying a dozen or so of bottles in a basket. You had sent them for the men, he said; the night was wet, a moderate draught of wine would not hurt them."

"But you knew I was not in the palace, you let me out of the gates yourself," I cried.

It was all the same. "You had sent it," Bouquet repeated stupidly; "the gentleman said he had come from you. He opened a bottle himself and we drank together before he went."

"And he drank also?"

"Faith, no, not all; I recollect now, he stumbled and spilt most of it. Oh, my eyes are closing; 'tis coming on again," and he rushed once more to the bucket.

Too late, I remembered Sir Paul's warning, "Bouquet is simple." However, it was no use reproaching him now.

"Has every man tasted this accursed stuff?" I asked, when he was able to speak.

"No, no, no!" he cried quickly, "only those on duty. The two outside were late; I withheld their share to punish them. The relief guard are still sleeping above—that was for them." And he pointed to half-a-dozen bottles in one corner.

I raised my foot to dash them to atoms; then refrained. If we survived to tell the tale they might come in useful. I dropped them instead into a chest that stood by, and carefully turned the key.

"Now for the men above, summon all; thank Heaven there is someone," and they came running down at first call, a dozen of them at least, in full possession of their faculties. At the same moment, the sentry I had sent to the other gate came in to make his report. One look at his face was enough. He had found the gate open and deserted, and his comrades dead drunk in the guard-house.

I left Bouquet and the men to make all three gates fast as they could, and, taking one trooper with me in case of need, I now hurried within the palace to find out what was going on there. By the lights in the windows the Duke still held high revel. I knew not who the stranger with the halting leg might be, but if Vanharten were there he should give an account to me. We passed through the doors without questioning. Not a servant was at his post, and when we reached the ante-room, where the pages should have been in waiting, that also was empty. The Chamberlain had surrounded the Duke with creatures of his own; in the hour of danger they all forsook him.

And what a sight met my eyes when I threw open the door of the banqueting-room. The Duke sat at the head of the table side-ways in his chair; his head fallen back, his face flushed, his mouth gaping wide open. At intervals here and there sat the only companions left him—the few who might have proved faithful. Some leant forward, face

downwards upon the table; some were twisted in strange contortions; some had fallen to the ground; but all, without exception, were unconscious—drunk or drugged. Needless to say, Count Vanharten was not among them.

What to do at first I knew not. It was impossible to leave the Duke thus; yet for aught I knew the Duchess might be in dire peril. I soon made up my mind, though—there was no time to waste in thinking—and taking up his Highness by the head and shoulders, I ordered my companion to support his feet. We carried him downstairs, through all the long passages, into the presence chamber, where I had so lately parted from the demoiselle. We met not a soul on the way. The palace could not have been more deserted had it been tenanted only by the dead. We laid our burden down at the foot of the great staircase, and, leaving the trooper to watch over him, I ran up to find if the Duchess had been forsaken in the same fashion as her husband. Heaven be thanked, I had scarce set foot within the ante-room, before the page started to his feet, and barred my passage with drawn sword.

"Keep back, whoever you are, or I run you through!" he exclaimed. "What is your business here?"

It was young Otger, a lad whom I both distrusted and disliked. Yet, as I look back now, I see I had no reason save a jealous one. The boy fancied himself in love with Mademoiselle de Suresne, and was always hovering around her. He drew back when he recognised me, and would have

muttered some apology, only I interrupted him with:

"Speak out, now, Monsieur Otger, if there be any truth at all in this city of yours, speak out as man to man. Are you for the Chamberlain or the Duchess?"

He recoiled as if he thought me mad. But I went on.

"If for the Chamberlain, go! I give my word you shall pass freely, but I want no more traitors here."

He glared at me defiantly, "Traitor in your teeth, proud Englishman! I am for my mistress heart and soul, against you or against any man."

I could have embraced him, I felt so glad. "Good, good, now we know where we are," and I grasped his unwilling hand. "There is foul treachery abroad to-night; the Duchess has need of every friend. Call her women, I beg of you; tell them to arouse her Highness, and that instantly. Then come back to me here."

He obeyed me without another word, and I waited until he returned, meaning he should help me with the Duke. A very few minutes brought him back, and I was hurrying down, when I saw something that made me pause. The door of the ante-room opened on to a long corridor dimly lighted midway by a hanging lamp. As I came out, I caught sight of two muffled figures. They glided for a moment beneath the light, only to be lost next moment in the gloom. They were coming towards me, and, beckoning Otger to my side, we drew back in the shade awaiting them. As they

came nearer, I saw the foremost was a woman, carrying a small case under her arm. Close behind followed a man, both moving with the greatest care so as to make no noise. Just before they reached the staircase, I stepped forth and confronted them. The woman uttered a stifled scream; her hood slipped back; it was the Contessa Motocaro. The man muttered an oath, and laid his hand upon his sword; then, after a whispered word with his companion, fell back and left it to her.

"Well met, Monsieur de Strathbourne," said the Contessa caressingly, coming forward and laying her hand upon my arm. "Well met, indeed, though truly your sudden appearance somewhat startled me." Then, putting her head so close to mine that her warm breath fanned my face: "I have here a friend—a friend of my husband's—who because he has enemies at court prefers to visit me in secret. In talking the time slipped away, and, fearful of evil tongues, I wish to let him out privily. With you I am sure my secret is safe;" and she smiled upon me so sweetly that had my heart not been elsewhere, I might have been beguiled. As it was, her trouble was wasted, and I answered coldly:

"You are leaving with your friend?" and I touched her cloak and the casket, which she tried to hide.

"Nay, monsieur, for what do you take me? I but accompany him as far as the sentry to see that he passes without trouble. *Ma foi,* we are so well looked after here," and she shrugged her shoulders with a pretty air of impatience. "It is difficult to get out as if we were in prison. Dear Monsieur de

Strathbourne, I pray you let my friend go quickly; you would not get me into trouble."

As she spoke the man moved, and my heart leaped into my mouth as I saw he halted on one leg. It seemed almost too good to be true that the traitor should thus fall into my power. Yet was I in a dilemma. I had left the Duke below guarded but by one trooper; I was in an agony of fear lest aught should happen to him. Happily I betrayed nothing of this in my countenance. Living in Ispari had at least taught me how to conceal my real sentiments, and I answered her lightly, in the same low tone we had used all through.

"It is indeed a good thing you met me, Contessa. Finding by chance the sentry at the door had deserted his post, I put my own man there instead. He would not have allowed your friend to pass. I will go get him out of the way—servants have long tongues, you know—if monsieur your friend will wait in this room for a few minutes. Here is only Monsieur Otger, and he, I am sure, is discretion itself."

This was another surprise for Madame la Contessa; she had not seen the youth before. Rather to my astonishment, directly she recognised him, her face brightened.

"Otger? Oh no, I am not afraid of him," she cried quickly, silencing her friend, who was about to remonstrate; he seemed very unwilling to wait. But after more whispering, very energetic on the Contessa's part, he reluctantly acquiesced and followed her into the room.

"They are traitors; keep them at any cost," I

muttered in the boy's ear just the one moment their backs were turned; then, closing the door, I flew down the stairs as if the devil himself were behind me. From the Contessa consenting to wait so readily I knew well she had some plan in her head. I might be outwitted even yet.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A MIDNIGHT ADVENTURE.

I FOUND everything below just as I had left it. No one had been near, the Duke had not stirred; save for his heavy breathing, one would have thought him dead. I tore down a long curtain that covered his Highness from head to foot—I did not want him to be recognised too soon—then we carried him up as before, I giving my trooper his orders on the way. Directly the Duke was set down he was to run and fetch Bouquet to me with all speed; the other men, bringing their senseless companions with them, were to assemble at the foot of the staircase. I had given up all hope of defending the gates, for I had not men enough; but thought I could hold the staircase. We ascended quietly as we could, though in truth the Duke was no light weight, and when I put my ear to the door before opening it, I heard the Contessa's voice in subdued but angry expostulation.

"You are my cousin, my ward, my husband is your guardian," she was saying. "You owe me obedience; how dare you to interfere with me? We must be gone before that fool is back. He may find that will make him linger. Let us pass, I say.

Would you serve a stranger rather than your own cousin?"

"I serve the Duchess, and I believe the Englishman to be her friend. I will not let you go until he returns."

"Enough of this!" interrupted another voice. "Stand aside, boy, or it will be the worse for you. Stand aside, or——"

I thought it was time to interfere now, and, pushing open the door, we carried in our burden. No one could see who it was; the curtain covered his Highness completely. It was as if we were bringing in a dead body. For a moment all three stared in astonishment; then my stranger gentleman, guessing the game was up, made a bolt for the door. Even if I had had to drop the Duke I should have stayed him, but young Otger was a boy of resource. He jumped in front and barred the fellow's passage.

"You dare to stay me!" he cried fiercely, and at once swords were drawn, and they set to.

I deposited the Duke upon a low couch in one corner—the trooper slipped out—then with sheathed sword I interfered between the combatants, knocking the stranger's weapon out of his hand.

"Monsieur, you forget where you are," I said sharply. "The ante-chamber of the Duchess is no place for scenes of strife."

"Let me go, then," he cried again, almost foaming with anger.

"Softly, softly, I pray. I fear I must trouble you first to answer a few questions. Monsieur Otger, go you yonder," and I pointed to the couch.

"Stand before that sleeping man with bare sword. Whatever happens here move not from your post, stir not hand or foot. I command you, in the name of the Duchess, to guard him with your life."

The youth looked astonished, but he obeyed me to the letter. He took his place without a word.

The Contessa did not interfere. Indeed, all had taken place so quickly she had not time. But now her friend turned upon her, saying savagely:

"It is you I have to thank for this. It is all through your cursed delay."

"Nay, thank your own covetousness," she retorted—the Contessa always held her own. "You insisted upon having the casket, and I could not get it because of Mademoiselle de Suresne. Blame her for being about so late, for that in truth is the real cause of it. And what matters it for you? If all be as you told me, 'tis but a short delay; whilst for me—I shall be lost." Then, turning to where I stood close by listening with all my ears, "Monsieur de Strathbourne, I crave your mercy. If my mistress find me abroad to-night I am indeed undone."

"Go then," I replied. "I do not war with women. Go back to your apartments, the way is closed below. Leave the casket behind. I will take charge of that."

I did not know in the least what the said casket might contain, but from her companion's anxiety to obtain possession of it, evidently something of consequence.

"You will not breathe my name?" she said, looking at me steadily.

"Not one word, I promise."

"Take it, then. Hist! here they come." And she made her way out at one end of the room just as the Duchess, accompanied by Mademoiselle de Suresne and other ladies, entered at the other.

The stranger tried to follow the Contessa, hoping to get out with a rush, and when I caught his collar he turned upon me with his dagger. For the second time that night the coat of mail saved my life.

The Duchess, who, roused hastily from her sleep, was clad in some disarray, stood still in amazement, as well she might. For whilst on one side was her page standing motionless with drawn sword, on the other were two men engaged in a fierce struggle. My adversary let me go directly he perceived the Duchess, however, and, throwing his cloak to the ground, dropped on one knee before her.

"Count Ornano, you here!" was her startled cry, and she looked at me questioningly.

"Even so, madame, your poor servant, Ornano, and I throw myself upon the protection of your Highness."

"I shall be very glad to hear what the Count Ornano is doing in my apartments at this hour."

"A lady is concerned in the matter, madame, an old friend who wished to see me unknown to all. I came—I was departing, when this English ruffian stayed me. He alone is the cause of this disturbance."

"Pray, which of my ladies did you come to see, monsieur?"

"Have mercy. Ask me not that, your Highness, or at least let it be in private. I give you my word it shall not happen again."

"Hold the door, Monsieur de Strathbourne. Now, sir, once more, the name of the lady."

"Since you will have it, then"—and he looked round, as if daring me to contradict him—"it was Mademoiselle de Suresne, my promised wife."

"You lie!" I exclaimed, starting forward, and, as there was now more light in the room, for the first time, I recognised him. It was the smart cavalier who had insulted the demoiselle when entering Dunstans. He who had been punished so cleverly by Nanette. This accounted for his lameness—truly the old mule had done her work well—and also for mademoiselle's repugnance when he was made known to her. But he did not remember me; I could see that very well.

The Duchess waved me back.

"Count Ornano, you have made an unfortunate selection. I saw a woman's skirts whisk through the opposite door as I entered, and Mademoiselle de Suresne is with me here. Besides"—and here she smiled rather maliciously—"I heard something of what passed before I came in. The captain of my guard gives his word too readily. Edmée, is not that my jewel casket on the floor yonder? I think it will be safer in your care. If you have nothing more against the Count, Monsieur de Strathbourne, I think he may go. The palace will be well quit of him. The woman I will deal with myself. It was for this you aroused me, I suppose?" and her glance turned towards the page. She could

not see what was behind him—the couch stood in the shadow.

"Not for this at all, your Highness," I cried quickly. "I ventured to call you up before discovering my gentleman here. Yet, before the Count departs he must answer a few questions." And I told her in brief words of the deserted gates and drugged guard. But before I had half done her manner changed, and she cried angrily:

"And you stand prating here whilst, perhaps, they are murdering my lord. What consequence is my safety? What matters anything? I will go to him at once. Keep yon man fast; his life will answer for my husband's. Out of my path; dare not to stay me!" and in her passion she would have swept me aside. I caught at her dress.

"Madame, your Highness, the Duke is here."

"Here—where?" and she looked around. She did not believe. I pointed to the couch.

"Monsieur Otger, lift the curtain."

The Duchess ran to her lord's side, uttering a sharp cry: "Is he dead?"

"Not dead, but insensible, madame. They have treated him no better than my men."

The Count turned a livid yellow when he saw the Duke. He seemed as if he could scarce believe his eyes. Then, as he listened to my explanation, his look of amazement turned to baffled rage. Still, he would not give in even yet. Recovering his self-possession, he said, calmly:

"Seeing that I was found in quite another part of the palace, even this addle-pated fellow scarce dare accuse me of being concerned in the matter."

"Speak out, Monsieur de Strathbourne," interrupted the Duchess. "Do you accuse the Count of this or not?"

"Not yet. I am waiting," and here—oh, joy! —Bouquet at last made his appearance. He halted just inside the door; but, before I could speak, his eyes fell upon Ornano. With one bound he was by his side.

"This is the man, my captain, who brought in the poisoned wine; this is the villain who made me clink glasses with him. In blue velvet—see?—with a peaked beard, and halting on one leg. Did I not describe him exactly? Ah, wretch, I have you now," and he shook the Count like a rat.

"Hands off, Bouquet," I cried. "The Duchess is present." But the man's fury carried conviction with it. There was no more to be said. The Count Ornano threw off the mask then, and, turning to me:

"Enough of this," he exclaimed. "It is time now to come to terms. My friends are close at hand. Let me go, and I swear to protect the Duchess. You cannot resist us. The garrison is mine; you have but a handful of foreigners."

The Duchess looked at me with eyes full of fear.

"It is true, madame," I returned. "We are only a handful, but we can hold our own until help arrives."

"No help can arrive," interposed the Count triumphantly. "There is no one to whom you could send—not even a dog could get out of Ispari tonight. We mean to tell our own tale when the time comes. Hark, they are at hand!" He threw open

the window, and we heard the sound of trampling feet, the hum of many voices. "You hear?" he repeated threateningly. "A word from me, and they lay down their arms; your mistress, the Duchess, is safe."

"And the Duke?"

"I will do my best for him; but the drunken sot hath already lost his throne—he is no longer Duke of Ispari."

"That remains to be seen. At any rate, he is Duke here. Madame, will you give me permission to arrest this man in your presence?"

"I give you permission to do all you will, my captain. I place everything in your hands."

I waited for no more, but, advancing to the Count, said:

"Do you yield yourself my prisoner, rescue or no rescue?"

"Hardly"—and he laughed—"seeing that my friends are at the gates. I am unarmed," and he threw his dagger from him. "If you hurt me now it will be murder."

"Nay, I leave that to my Lord Chamberlain and his friend, Vivares; but I mean to hold you fast. Bind him hand and foot, Bouquet, and make sure that the cords are secure."

The noise outside had by this time swelled into a roar, and "Down with the Duke!" "Death to the Duke!" "Long live Duke Honatrin!"—the name of the Chamberlain—came plainly to our ears.

Now that the aim of the insurgents was thus openly declared, I felt it time to signal for help.

"See, madame," I cried, taking a candle from

the sconce and going to the window, "watch yonder tower of St. Gudule. We English are not quite so simple as we seem. Sir Paul Caryl anticipated something of this, and prepared for it. I am not so deprived of help as the Count Ornano and his friends imagine," and I waved the light in the air. Almost instantly an answering signal flashed forth. I waved again three times, and in a very few minutes the iron basket on the church tower kindled into flame. It was a signal visible for miles, and my heart rejoiced when I saw it blazing merrily.

"Now, an it please your Highness," I said, as I turned away, "I will leave the prisoner here whilst I go and make ready for the defence."

"Monsieur Otger, you may leave your post. The Duke is safe now, and I need your help elsewhere."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE FIGHT ON THE STAIRS.

THE insurgents, separating into two bodies, had reached the side gates by now, and very much surprised they were to find them closed and fastened. They made no attempt to break in, however, but swept round to the front, where, after a short consultation, a trumpet was sounded, and someone demanded a parley. I sent Otger to see what they wanted; I was busy superintending the erection of a barricade across the staircase. The marble steps were broad and shallow, but three parts of the way up there was a sharp turn and space of landing, and it was here I meant to make a stand. We first carried up the drugged men, depositing them out of harm's way in the ante-room, then bringing up all the furniture from below we built up a strong barricade. Sheltered behind this, we could sweep the whole staircase, without getting much hurt ourselves. If they came with a rush they would have to dash against the pikes, while men above could fire down upon them. The danger was lest we should be overpowered by sheer numbers. Vanharten was a brave and skilful captain; if he were but well seconded it might go hard with us. Still,

St. Gudule's beacon carried far. I thought I should be able to hold out until the promised help arrived. Presently the page came back to me.

"Vanharten, that foul traitor, is at their head," said the boy. "He commands me to inform you that his Highness hath been deposed, and the Chamberlain made Duke in his stead. He gives you five minutes to open the gates, and deliver up the Count Ornano."

"Five minutes? It is not enough. Speak the rogue cunningly; tell him I must consult the Duchess. The barricade is scarce finished yet; I have some pallets coming from the women's rooms which will stay the bullets finely."

My young page was soon back again. "He will grant not a minute longer unless you send out Ornano. I think the light on St. Gudule hath somewhat frightened him. He has told his followers 'tis to signal their new Duke, but he himself knows better."

"We have but two minutes left then. Quick, over with you, mind how you climb"—and I helped him over the barricade—"I will go speak them from the window."

I had scarcely shown myself when—

"Yield, Strathbourne!" shouted Vanharten—I could distinguish him plainly, for they had kindled a great fire just without. "Yield you quickly. You are not a dozen men, all told; we nearer two hundred. We have no quarrel against you. Give up the Count Ornano, our leader, and you shall leave the town unhurt."

My answer was short and to the point.

"The Count Ornano lies bound hand and foot within, waiting to be tried as a traitor. Unless your men disperse at once such will be your doom also. Saw you not the light on St. Gudule? Troops even now are riding fast to my assistance."

"'Tis false, 'tis our own signal," cried Vanharten, loud enough for all to hear. "Your blood be upon your own head. To it, men, break the gates down and make an end of them"—and at the same moment a bullet whizzed past me so close that I felt the wind. There was a woman's scream behind, but it was not from the Duchess or the demoiselle, and her Highness rated the maid for a coward angrily. I would have had her retire into the inner chambers herself, but she refused.

"Nay," she said, "I am the daughter and the sister of soldiers, the wife too of one who in his youth led the field. Carry my lord into safety within and I shall be grateful; we will watch over him by turns. Besides, you will have need of us. Bring your wounded here, they shall be well tended."

The gates were soon down, and the insurgents came in with a rush, more like rabble than disciplined soldiers; I did not think Vanharten had much authority over them. They made for the Duke's quarters first, and there were cries of disappointment when they found their prey had escaped them. But they did not lose all.

The furniture came crashing through the windows to feed the fire, followed presently by the bodies of the revellers cut and hacked beyond recognition. I saw Vanharten's hand in this. It was good policy. Once having imbued their hands in

blood it was impossible for his followers to draw back; they must fight it out to the end.

Yet a few minutes and they surged round until they reached the foot of our staircase. They filled up the great hall and out on to the terrace beyond, and I peered over rather anxiously to see what manner of force they had brought against me. The faithless garrison led the way, with a goodly number of men from the walls; the remainder were the new levies Sir Paul had been training so industriously. These were the most to be feared; the remainder seemed a horde of rabble a great deal more intent upon plunder than fighting. I could see them very well, for though I had extinguished nearly all light up above, they carried torches and blazing brands, and candles from the Duke's apartments.

They were a little taken aback, I fancied, when they first perceived my barricade, but Vanharten gave them no time to consider. He ordered his men forward, they fixed their arms, fired a ringing volley; then, under cover of the smoke, rushed forward to dislodge us. The straw pallets stayed the bullets, their fire was quite harmless, and my men, with their matches well alight and a second loaded weapon beside each of them, waited calmly until I gave the word. I allowed the enemy to come up almost within touch of us; then a sheet of flame shot forth, and the stairs were strewed with dead and dying. A second volley from the spare muskets completed their discomfiture; they turned and fled leaving their wounded behind them.

"Well done, well done!" cried a soft voice from

above, and, looking up, I saw the Duchess leaning over the banister with Mademoiselle de Suresne close behind her. Others heard her too, for at once a shot was fired from below which struck the wall just above the demoiselle's head.

"Our young captain is frightened, Edmée," said the Duchess, laughing, as she shook a little plaster from her shoulder, "is it for you or for me that he hangs out that white flag upon his cheeks?"

For in truth my heart stood still when I saw how narrowly the bullet had missed them. The demoiselle's eyes met mine. For a moment there was something in her look I could almost have taken for love; then, as if ashamed, she hastily turned away. But indeed it was not a time to give heed to such matters. Taking warning by their first repulse, our assailants were now making for us again with more caution. I implored the Duchess to retire, and scarcely had she turned her back when they were upon us.

Vanharten fought with more system this time. He had held us too cheaply. They fired, then dropped on their knees as our volley flashed forth, and the bullets went over their heads. Then before, as they thought, we had time to reload, they dashed forward, and strove to climb the barricade. Our reserve weapons once more did us good service. As the foremost fell in a heap, those behind wavered, and would have retreated, had not Vanharten, waving his sword and shouting lustily, led them on again. It was a brave assault, and well delivered—a hard hand-to-hand fight—but we beat them off at last.

Yet still they were not disheartened. Sir Paul's good training made itself felt, and Vanharten led them well. They came on again and again, until the stairs were so slippery with blood they fell over one another as they ran.

After the fourth charge it began to look very black for us. The barricade was gradually falling. It was being pulled down piece by piece, and they allowed us no time to repair it. True, there were frequent pauses between the attacks, but they had some sharp-shooters planted down below. We did not dare expose ourselves. Still, we had done very well. My brave men fought like lions; it was a pity I had not a few more of them.

The Duchess had plenty to do now; every other man was wounded more or less. When the enemy retreated they would run in and have their hurts bound up; then, on the alarm being given, those who could would rush out and take their places again. Those killed outright died fighting; their bodies helped support the barricade. Truly it was one of the most stubborn fights that ever I took part in.

All this had taken time. The short night passed away without our knowing. It came upon us as a surprise when the rising sun flooded every corner. Could I but hold out one short hour longer, the promised help must surely arrive. Vanharten knew it, too, and gathered his men together to overwhelm us with one last blow. The stairs were cleared of the dead—we had no ammunition left to fire upon them—and, looking over, I saw hammers and axes passed from hand to hand. Our frail barricade was

doomed. It was only our steady firing that had preserved it so long.

My resolution was soon taken to leave the landing altogether, and defend the upper stair. This was much narrower. With sword and pike, half-a-dozen determined men could hold it for awhile against a host.

I picked out all able to stand. Alas! there were not many. The others I sent into the ante-room with orders to close and hold the door. Bouquet was to command them, and I went within to give him some last orders. No one was near. The Duchess had gone to her husband. The demoiselle was praying beside a dying man, and I spoke in a low tone that I might not disturb her. After explaining to the Swiss exactly what he was to do, I went on:

"You will get the women out of the way first. Tell the Duchess it is necessary for her lord's safety; then hold the door as long as you can. Remember, a little more time is all we need. It is impossible for Sir Paul to fail us. We will keep the stairs outside, until not a man is left alive. You do your part as well, and the dogs will be beaten yet. If you could rouse those drugged men—I saw one move just now—I should have no fear at all for you. You will have plenty of time. They will not overcome us in a moment."

"But that means certain death for you, my captain," cried Bouquet. "Do you take command here, and let me go outside? It is partly my fault that this has happened. It is but just that I should die."

"So you will one day, my good friend, but not this time, I hope. It is your duty now to obey me. Commend me to Sir Paul when he returns, and tell him my only regret is that I did not live to win my spurs;" and I was just turning to go, when a soft hand was laid upon my arm. The demoiselle had stolen up unperceived, and heard our last words.

"Is it true, monsieur, what he says?" and there was a strange look in her dark eyes. "Is it true that you are going to your death?"

I laughed lightly. "Bouquet is excited. He speaks with exaggeration. I shall not fall the sooner for leaving a message for my kinsman."

"They are going to barricade the door and leave you outside?" she persisted.

"Why not, mademoiselle? It will be no worse for me than for the others. I shall not be alone. I fight at the head of my men. You would not have me a craven?"

"That you could not be," she cried quickly. "Yet—yet—I would not have you die."

"You take too gloomy a view, mademoiselle; and just now you were so brave. It is necessary to have the door closed. They will be nearer; bullets may be flying about. But 'tis only for a little while. The troop Sir Paul promised me is sure to arrive; then all will be well. Yet there is one thing I should like," and, dropping my light tone, I spoke more earnestly. "I wish, once for all, to ask your forgiveness for my share in that hateful past."

"I have nothing to forgive," she exclaimed passionately. "It is you—you. They called you a horse-boy, but no well-born gentleman ever treated

me with greater respect. When I hated you most I still remembered your noble courtesy."

"Mademoiselle, your kind words embolden me. Now that you have forgiven me, now that we may never meet again, I may, perhaps, say without offence what else my lips had never uttered. Mademoiselle de Suresne, I have dared to love you, I have loved you always." And giving her no time to reply I raised her hand to my lips and was gone. Almost I thought I heard a soft cry of "Jean, Jean!" but I was half across the threshold. I would not turn, and next moment Bouquet closed and fastened the door behind me.

CHAPTER XXX.

LORENZO OF MILAN.

HAD I expected ever to look the demoiselle in the face again those last words would not have been spoken. As it was, I felt glad; she knew now that I loved her; knew that she was all the world to me. The thought gave me fresh strength, made me feel as if I could defy an army, and, joining my little band, I cried: "Courage, my friends," and I pointed to the bright sun. "Courage, see it is day already, help is sure to be here soon. We have Sir Paul's words for it, and you know he never failed us yet."

"Not he!" was the answering cry, "and when he comes he shall not call us cowards." And as our foes made their great rush they were met by cries of "Caryl, Caryl! St. George for England, and have at 'em."

There followed a wild din, a frantic clash of steel, a fierce struggle hand to hand. I was beaten down to one knee, almost I thought all was over, when one of the brave fellows precipitated himself upon my assailant, and, clutching at his throat, they rolled down the stairs together. The momentum of their fall overthrew others, and, seized with a sudden panic, the enemy took to their heels and

fled. Once again we had a few moments to breathe.

Not for long this time, however; they saw our scanty numbers, and were too enraged by such an ignominious repulse to need much rallying. They knew well we could not hold out against them, that their hard-bought victory was close at hand. Still, we had gained a few precious minutes, and to us every moment was of value.

I scarcely know how to describe that last *mêlée*. We had the advantage of position. Standing on the top steps we could smite downwards, and our long swords did mighty execution. I was fighting bare-headed, blood streaming from a wound in my temple, where the helmet had been cloven from my brow, nor were any of my comrades much better. They drove us back step by step, trampling on the wounded as they fell. Once a man lost his footing he was not able to rise again, the fight surged backwards and forwards so furiously.

It was nearly at an end. There were only four of us left, driven back to the last stair near the door, when there arose loud cries from below. I gave little heed; I had just closed with that arch traitor, Vanharten—the first time I had been able to get at him. Then came a trampling of horses in the court-yard, a sharp rattle as of men dismounting in haste, a discharge of musketry, and our peril was at an end. Vanharten and his followers turned and fled. I was too exhausted to follow, but before they reached the foot of the staircase they were cut down. The door opened behind me, Bouquet and one or two of those who had been drugged

rushed forth; save those who had taken to flight on the first alarm not a man of our foes escaped.

I saw Bertelin and his men all striking about them from right to left, and with them also were some strange troopers, in whose service I could not distinguish. Then suddenly, from amid the confusion, there emerged a tall knight clad in bright steel from head to foot. His visor was raised, disclosing the features of a handsome man of middle age; a face I had never seen before. I wondered dimly who it was and how he came to be there, but I felt too faint to trouble much. I was hurt more than I knew. At times the noise and shouting sounded far away, the whole scene seemed to swim before me; then with an effort I thrust the weakness back. For a while I was myself again.

The knight ran lightly up the stair, spurning aside the dead as they came in his way, and presently was clasped in the arms of the Duchess. She embraced him on each cheek with a little cry of triumph:

"At last, at last, Lorenzo! I began to think, my brother, you had forgotten me."

"Nay, I knew not you were in peril. I was given to understand you had a foreign guard who might be depended upon. And I was not wrong it appears," as he looked round. "By St. Anthony, they bore themselves bravely. You led them, young sir?" turning to me where I stood, supporting myself against the wall. "You have done your *devoir* right well; 'tis Lorenzo of Milan who tells you so."

I flushed with pleasure at his praise. Lorenzo of

Milan was one of the most renowned knights in all Italy.

"Come," the knight went on, "we will to my lady's chamber till the carrion be cleared away. 'Tis an ugly sight, and no place for fair ladies," and he offered his hand to the Duchess.

"One moment, my brother," she cried quickly. "I have a boon to beg of you before you stir one step. This young captain of mine—this captain of my guard who has defended me so well, he is but a squire—has he not earned his knighthood? What place more fitting than this blood-stained stair, what hand more worthy than yours to confer it?"

"Faith, madame, you speak well; the young spark hath won his spurs fairly. Your name, young sir? You are of noble birth? Then kneel, and in the name of Heaven, our Lady and St. Anthony, I dub thee knight," and he struck me three times with his sword. "Rise up, Sir John of Strathbourne. I hope one day we may fight side by side."

The Duchess, with many a kind word, held out her hand for me to kiss; Mademoiselle de Suresne, who, as usual, was close behind her, did the same. But the demoiselle extended her left hand, and, as I raised it to my lips, I saw it was bare of all rings save one, and that one was my own. She wore my father's ring, the ring I had placed upon her finger before the priest in the brigands' chapel. What this might portend I could not tell, and I dared not raise my eyes. I felt ashamed before her now that she knew my secret. But Sir Lorenzo led the way briskly into the ante-room, saying as he went:

"Bind up your head and come this way, Sir of

Strathbourne, if you will; my time is short, and I must settle this matter ere I go. I must be on my way again before noon. Nay, start not, my sister, you are safe enough now. I can leave a sufficient guard; your young knight will answer for the rest. I have joined the Bande Neroni, and we were on our way to reinforce Lautrec when we fell in with Bertelin here, riding in hot haste. When I learnt his errand, I turned and rode with him. But I must be with my troop again within twenty-four hours, or I may be too late to lead them into battle."

I would willingly have been excused; I could scarce stand upright, yet a false pride forbade me to say how sorely I was hurt. My wounded head accounted for my pale face and blood-stained condition; no one suspected aught else. A good draught of wine restored me somewhat, however, and I followed with the rest.

The knight's proceedings did not take very long. As soon as he heard how Ornano had been captured, he comprehended all without difficulty. He had the prisoner unbound and brought before him. I was called upon to state what I knew, and Bouquet swore it was the Count who gave him the drugged wine. When Sir Lorenzo heard there were some bottles remaining below, he had one brought up, and pouring a little into the hollow of his hand put his lips to it.

"Pah!" he cried, spitting it out with an exclamation of disgust. "'Tis easy to see your knaves were English. The Duke was not poisoned with this, I trow. The treason is clear; proved without manner of doubt. Have you aught to say, Count

Ornano, before I pronounce sentence against you?"

"I claim a fair trial before the Duke. You have no jurisdiction over me."

"I am sitting on behalf of the Duke, and would fain save his Highness trouble. As for a fair trial, it is much fairer than you would have given your master. Why, man, if such treachery as yours were to go unpunished no king would be safe on his throne. By the way, hath the prisoner been searched? Hath he any documents about him?"

The Count at first resisted furiously, then, finding he was only subjected to greater indignities, resigned himself to the inevitable with a curse. He had reason for his resistance. From amongst the inner folds of his doublet they at length drew forth a sheet of paper closely covered with writing. The knight pounced upon it directly.

"A proclamation as I live!" he cried, when he had looked over the first few lines. "Why, here we have it all in a nutshell. Announcement of the late Duke's death—'twas murder you meant, then, not imprisonment—accession of Duke Honatrin—not yet, I think, by your leave—and here on the other side a list of the principal ringleaders to be rewarded. Per Bacco, this ought to open the Duke's eyes. He will know his true friends at last! Take the prisoner below, allow him five minutes with a priest, then shoot him in the open square. Let his body be thrown afterwards into the town ditch, that these rebellious knaves may see the end of traitors."

"You dare not!" cried the Count excitedly. "I

appeal to the King of France. The Marquis of Suresne is dead, my father is now a French vassal."

"You mistake, monsieur," I interposed, though I had some ado to speak, and my voice sounded faint and weak. "The Marquis is alive and well, and safely on his way to the frontier, as mademoiselle his sister can testify. It is Vivares—Vivares who——" Then came a noise as if all the waters on the seashore were surging about my head, and the figures around grew dim and indistinct. I must have fallen, I think, for the last I understood was a loud cry from the knight. "Ho, there, see to your captain; why did the fool not say he was wounded?" And all became a blank.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"MY HUSBAND."

I WAS ill for some weeks, knowing nothing of what was going on, and when I came to myself all was changed. The ringleaders in the late rebellion had been executed, the Chamberlain had fled to the Imperialists, Ispari was quiet again; and Sir Paul was only awaiting my recovery to return to Calais. He told me the news bit by bit, as he sat every day by my bedside. "Our work here is done, Jean," he said. "They have a strong garrison, and a faithful man to command it; our services are no longer needed. The very business we set out to accomplish has been achieved without us. His Holiness the Pope hath escaped from those accursed brigands, and is safe at Orvieto. Lautrec is marching now to besiege Naples. I doubt it will be a long and tedious task. Though I would have served him faithfully had he allowed me, 'tis well for us we are out of it."

How well we hardly realised until later, when we heard that the Marshal himself and three-fourths of his army had fallen victims to the pestilence.

"As for you, Jean," Sir Paul continued, "you have nothing to complain of, I vow. You have

had a bad bout, it is true, but 'tis worth it—you have won your spurs gloriously."

I was longing to hear somewhat of the demoiselle, but not daring to ask, questioned him of the Duchess instead.

"The Duchess? Ah, you are in high favour there, Jean, and if you choose to remain in Ispari she hath honours in store for you. Even that high and mighty damsel, Mademoiselle de Suresne, condescended to be grateful for your services to her brother. She delayed her departure for three whole days because she would not leave until you were out of danger."

"Departure?—she has gone whither?" I cried, trying to raise myself.

"Gently, gently, Jean! One would almost think you were interested in the lady. She has gone to France; the King sent for her. Thanks to you, the young Marquis reached the French court safe and sound, and I suppose the tidings he brought made King Francis demand her presence. The lady is a French subject, you know; the King will bestow her in marriage upon one of his nobles. She made me promise to seek her out when I returned to France, and I am to take you with me."

The demoiselle had forgiven my presumption, then; that was much, but I did not know that I cared to see her again. Since I had learned to love her too well for my own peace, I tried to persuade myself it were best we should not meet.

There is no need to say much concerning the remainder of my stay in Ispari, save to mention that the Duchess presented me with a costly neck-

lace out of the jewels I had saved from the Contessa. She would fain have had me stay at her court, where she promised me great honour, but, when she found my mind was set on going, she gave me the necklace instead.

"'Twill serve for your wife when you have one," she said graciously, "a queen has worn it ere now. Or you may sell it to forward your advancement; 'tis your own to deal with as you will. Sure am I that you have earned it."

"It will buy him a fair manor in England," cried Sir Paul, taking the words out of my mouth. "Thanks to your Highness, our Jean will be no landless knight."

I was carried in a litter during the first part of the journey, being too weak to sit my horse, but by the time we had crossed the mountains, I was able to ride some hours every day. Here Sir Paul left me to follow by slow stages with the troop; whilst he, taking only a couple of servants, rode post haste to deliver his report to the King.

He had been gone some days, and we were yet almost a week's journey from Paris, where the court was then abiding, when at the little town of Specs, where we had halted for our mid-day meal, there arrived a messenger from Sir Paul with a letter. The man had a sorry tale to tell. He had been directed to ride with all haste, but on the way had fallen in with thieves who had taken from him his horse and all his money—scarcely, he swore, had he got off with life. Fortunately, the letter escaped them, and he had continued his journey as soon as he could. It was the knave's own fault;

he had been bidden take a companion, but thought instead to pocket the money for two, and when I read the letter I drove him from my presence lest I should kill him where he stood. Thus it ran:

"My Young Cousin: When you see this, haste hither to Paris with all speed. A certain lady hath need of you. She has told me a story, 'tis incredible, though well I see 'tis true, yet wishes she not the tale known to all. She is in a sore strait, the King commanding her to wed. He gives a *fête* at the palace on the evening of Wednesday, the last day of this month, and for part of the diversions mademoiselle is to select a husband. There are many suitors, for besides being a fair lady she hath a noble dowry, and the King ordains that she should choose from among them before the court. 'Tis a strange fancy, but what would you; the King's Highness, you know, is ever seeking fresh amusement. It is the lady's own wish that I should let you know; methinks if you are present she will choose without trouble. So haste you hither now, quick as thy hurts will allow thee. My Lord of St. Edmunds is expected daily; he will stand your friend with the King.—Your loving kinsman,

"Paul Caryl.

"At my lodgings in Paris this Tuesday morning, by a sure hand to be delivered with all speed."

The *fête* was to be on the evening of Wednesday; this was mid-day on Tuesday, and I was four days' good journey from Paris. Almost I felt as if I were going mad. To have happiness such as I

had never dreamed of almost within my touch, only to lose it through the sordidness of a thieving rascal!

There was but one thing in my favour: the road to Paris was well travelled. As there was a continual traffic between the court and the army in Italy, there would be no difficulty in obtaining constant relays of fresh horses. If I could ride without stopping day or night, I might arrive in time even yet. I took no one with me, such travelling as I meant to do was only possible for one; I merely ordered the escort to follow quickly as they could, then galloped off alone on the first stage of my long journey. Amid all the tumult that possessed me, of one thing only I felt certain—I would reach Paris in time or die.

Of much of that wild ride I can recall little. There is only a confused sense of trees and hedges rushing by, of clattering through streets where all hurried out of the way to clear a road for me, then on through the dark, still night, whilst the stars seemed to mock at my slow progress. Twice my horse fell dead as I dismounted. But my pouch was well filled. I scattered gold lavishly. I never had to wait.

Once, in the darkness, I encountered a gang of footpads, who, drawing up in a row across the road, tried to stay me. My horse was fresh. I rode on and over them, scattering them out of my path like chaff. A few bullets came whistling after, but I was almost out of range; they dropped short harmlessly.

As the hours passed on my worst trouble was my hardly-healed wound. My side burnt like fire. I

had much ado at times to draw breath; but I only bound my sash tighter and tighter, and strove to ease myself by leaning forwards. Yet did I never slacken my speed; never once did I draw rein. I stayed for nothing, until I reached the next posting-house. Every time I dismounted I swallowed a small cup of wine, and I ate a crust of bread, now and again, as I went along. Not that I wanted it, or felt the least hunger, but I would leave nothing undone to keep up my strength.

All went well until late in the afternoon of that fateful Wednesday, when I was within measurable distance of Paris. It was growing dusk, and I had still many weary leagues to ride. But my hopes were high; I should do it yet. The *fête* would not take place until after supper. If I arrived before eight of the clock I should surely be in time. I was spent and weary. My full strength had not come back to me; yet I could still keep my seat, and, whilst I could sit, I could ride. And then, suddenly my hopes were overthrown. I was drawing near the next posting-house, my poor horse was well-nigh done, and all at once it fell dead lame. I used whip and spur, but all to no purpose; I could scarce get the brute beyond a walk. Had I been able, I should have jumped down to run by its side, but I had not strength enough for that. I dared not even dismount. The road was lonely. Still, I knew a village was near; the delay would not be so long after all. Yet it chafed me greatly. I had a presentiment it was but the beginning of ill-fortune. And very speedily indeed did my fears seem to be realised.

I had not gone many yards farther, my horse limping painfully, when there was a stealthy rustling in the bushes that lined the road, and some half-a-dozen evil-looking ruffians leaped out upon me.

"Yield you, sir knight, or you are a dead man," cried one, and in a trice I was dragged from my horse. I made no resistance; a feeling of utter helplessness suddenly overpowered me. All was at an end. What mattered it? I was not even surprised when, presently, amongst them I recognised the brigand, Gottlieb.

"You here, Gottlieb? That is well," I said faintly. "Now we only want the captain."

He thrust his noseless face into mine. "Why, as I live, 'tis Jean the horse-boy. Hands off, comrades, 'tis a friend. So you escaped skin-whole after all, Jean? We thought you had been dashed to pieces. Art in fine fettle, too," and he passed his hands over my clothes. "Jean, thou hast been robbing thy master."

"Is the captain with you?" I asked. Perhaps if the wretch thought I meant to claim my bride he might help me.

"I am captain here. The Baron swung on a gibbet months ago. We fell on hard times after you disappeared. The captain was so sore at missing the girl, he lost his cunning. We were caught in a trap; there was an end of the Thousand Devils. A few of us got away, and have taken to the road, as you see, but 'tis a poor living, Jean," and he glanced at my pouch covetously.

"You are on foot?" I looked around; I could see no sign of any horses.

"Some of us. We have a beast or two in the thicket. At need they carry double. You seem to have done better."

"Ay, I have found friends; yet I am riding for my life. I have gold left still. I will give you all I possess for a horse that will carry me to Paris."

"And what is to prevent us taking it?" he said coolly. "We were not sworn comrades. You never entered the band."

"There is nothing to prevent you. I am past resisting. All strength has gone out of me." And, truly, I had to lean against my horse in order to keep upright. Had I taken one step I should have fallen. "I am in your power, as you see, yet I think you would find it pay better to help me."

"If it will pay better, that is another thing. Go on; we are listening."

I turned out my pouch. There were still many gold pieces left, at which the worthy Gottlieb opened his eyes wider than ever, exclaiming, as he tested one between his teeth:

"Faith, but your pockets are well lined, Jean the horse-boy."

"'Tis but a few as earnest money. Give me a horse that will carry me to Paris before eight of the clock this night, and fifty more shall be paid you when and where you will. I have friends, as I said. I swear I will not fail you."

"Fifty gold crowns! Why, 'tis a fortune!"

"'Tis yours if you have the horse—it must be a good one mind," for now I had given up my money I could obtain no more relays.

He looked at me doubtfully. "You have ridden far already?"

"I started from Specs yesterday at mid-day."

There was a murmur of surprise, and they gathered about me curiously, some eager for me to have the horse, some crying out that my words were lies. Then Gottlieb's voice rose above the rest: "You say you left Specs yesterday at mid-day—you would come out by the North gate; what saw you as you passed by?"

"They were hanging three men and a woman, and one man was noseless like to you." I answered quickly, for such, indeed, had been the case, though at the time I scarce noticed it. Now it all came before me in a flash, and I remembered the mutilated man.

"His tale is true, comrades, he must have seen it or he could not have known, and 'twas the hour and the day our friends were to suffer. Jean, you shall have the horse, and may good luck attend you. As for the fifty crowns, tell me where you are to be found, and I will come for them myself; 'tis too large a sum to trust to others. 'Tis a good beast I am going to give you, one that we can ill spare. We stole him not a month agone, yet already hath he saved me from the fate of those at Specs. The watch pressed me sore, it was a stern chase and a hard, yet they never came within range of me."

The horse was brought forth, a good beast I could see even in that dim light, and they lifted me to my seat. I had no power to mount of myself, but once up I was all right.

"Go your ways," cried Gottlieb. "Ride softly

until he grows warm, and I warrant he will carry you to Paris without stopping. I will come for those crowns within——"

I heard no more; I shook the reins and was off. Soon I had left Gottlieb and his fellows far behind me.

. . . . . .

There was high revelry in the old Palais de Tournelles; when I rode into the courtyard the windows were lit up from top to bottom. An embassy from England had arrived that morning, and, after receiving the ambassadors in state, King Francis had bidden them to his banquet and the *fête* that was to follow after.

Since leaving Gottlieb, until I arrived in the palace courtyard, I had not once drawn rein, and my spurs were dripping with blood. As I pulled up now, the poor horse, which had carried me so well, swayed to one side, then fell heavily; and, too stiff to move a limb, I fell with it. The wondering attendants, thinking surely I was the bearer of great news, lifted me up with all speed, and, soon as I could frame my parched lips to speech, I demanded Sir Paul Caryl. My voice was so husky it startled even myself; I thought at first it was someone else speaking.

In as short a time as even I could have wished, Sir Paul was by my side looking at me in consternation.

"Am I too late?" I cried, catching at his arm. "Your letter only reached me at Specs yesterday noon, I have ridden without stopping since."

"You have ridden from Specs since noon yes-

terday? You, fresh from a sick-bed? Come, that ought at least to excuse your dress, I will take it upon myself. Courage, Jean! You are not too late, though but ten minutes more and I could not have said so. My Lord Abbot of St. Edmunds is here; he arrived this morning. All now will go well. Canst walk? Take my arm, so; that is better. It is difficult climbing the stairs, I know. Lean on me more heavily, I will let you go when we are within. Now rest here"—guiding me to a bench in the ante-room—" whilst I go and obtain permission from the King."

The door was partly open. From where I sat I could see into the great chamber of the Palais de Tournelles. It was hung with blue hangings covered with *fleur-de-lys*, the same device being repeated on the floor in blue tiles. The King, clad in white velvet covered with precious stones, sat at the far end in a chair raised four steps above the ground, under a canopy of cloth of gold; and all about him were fair ladies and noble cavaliers in brave attire and glittering jewels. There was a sound of music, and soft voices, and merry laughter; then came a sudden silence—Sir Paul was speaking to King Francis. This was broken presently by the King's bluff voice.

" A young knight hardly yet recovered from his wounds, who hath ridden from Specs since yesterday to be present at this *fête? Foi de gentilhomme*, that is something like a ride! Dress or no dress, admit him instantly. But let him not spoil sport; keep him in the background until we have finished with Mademoiselle de Suresne; afterwards you may

present him if you will. The lady is coy. She is hard to please. Yet will I have no longer delay."

Sir Paul came out to fetch me, and we entered together. Every eye at this end of the room was turned upon me in amaze, and those who stood in my way hasted to draw aside as I came near. As I passed before a long mirror I saw the reason. I stood amidst that gaily-dressed throng clad in my rough riding suit and covered with dust and mud from head to foot. Nor was this all. My hair was glued to my brow with sweat, my face was livid, my eyes bloodshot and staring. I shuddered as I gazed. It is the brigand over again, I thought; she will turn from me with disgust and shame. Yet could I not help myself one whit, so I held me erect as I could, and, looking neither to right nor to left, followed close behind Sir Paul. He led me almost to the top of the room; then, halting outside a half circle of young cavaliers, softly touched my arm. I looked up and beheld Mademoiselle de Suresne. She was standing with downcast eyes beside the King, who was saying something to her I could not hear.

There were many other ladies around; the Queen-mother, Louise of Savoy, with her usual bevy of beautiful attendants; the King's sister, Marguerite of Valois; the reigning favourite, the Duchesse d'Etampes; and all were laughing and whispering as if some very good jest were being played. Then the demoiselle answered the King, and her dear familiar voice thrilled me through:

"Since your Highness wills it so, I must needs obey, though, indeed, it is a great honour these

gentlemen are doing me," and she made a courtesy towards those in the semicircle that would have graced a queen. "Yet, I can choose but one; the others—they will not think I mean any affront."

"Nay, nay, that is understood," interrupted Francis impatiently. "'Tis a recognised condition; all have promised to abide by your choice. Come, now, I will take you myself," and, rising, he presented his hand to lead her round.

The court party were so taken up with what was passing that they had not noticed my intrusion, and now Sir Paul pushed me a little forward until I stood on the edge of the circle. The demoiselle looked up—our eyes met. I forgot my rough dress, my travel-stained condition; forgot everything, save that I loved her. Her gaze lasted but for one moment, then quitting the King's side she came toward me with outstretched hands and quivering lips:

"Your Highness, I make my choice here. Monsieur—Jean—my husband!"

THE END.

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